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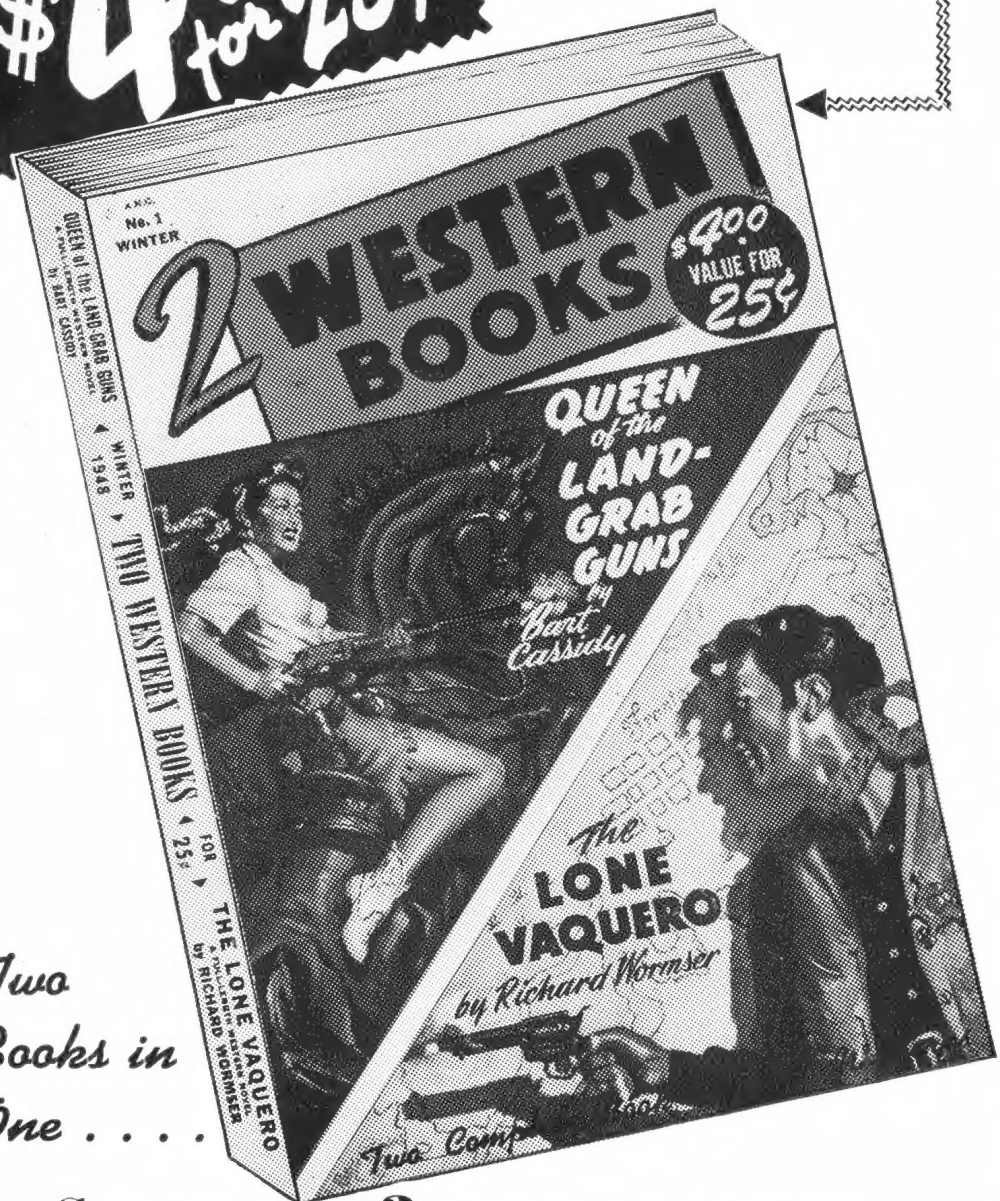

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SQUAW GUNS

By DAN CUSHMAN

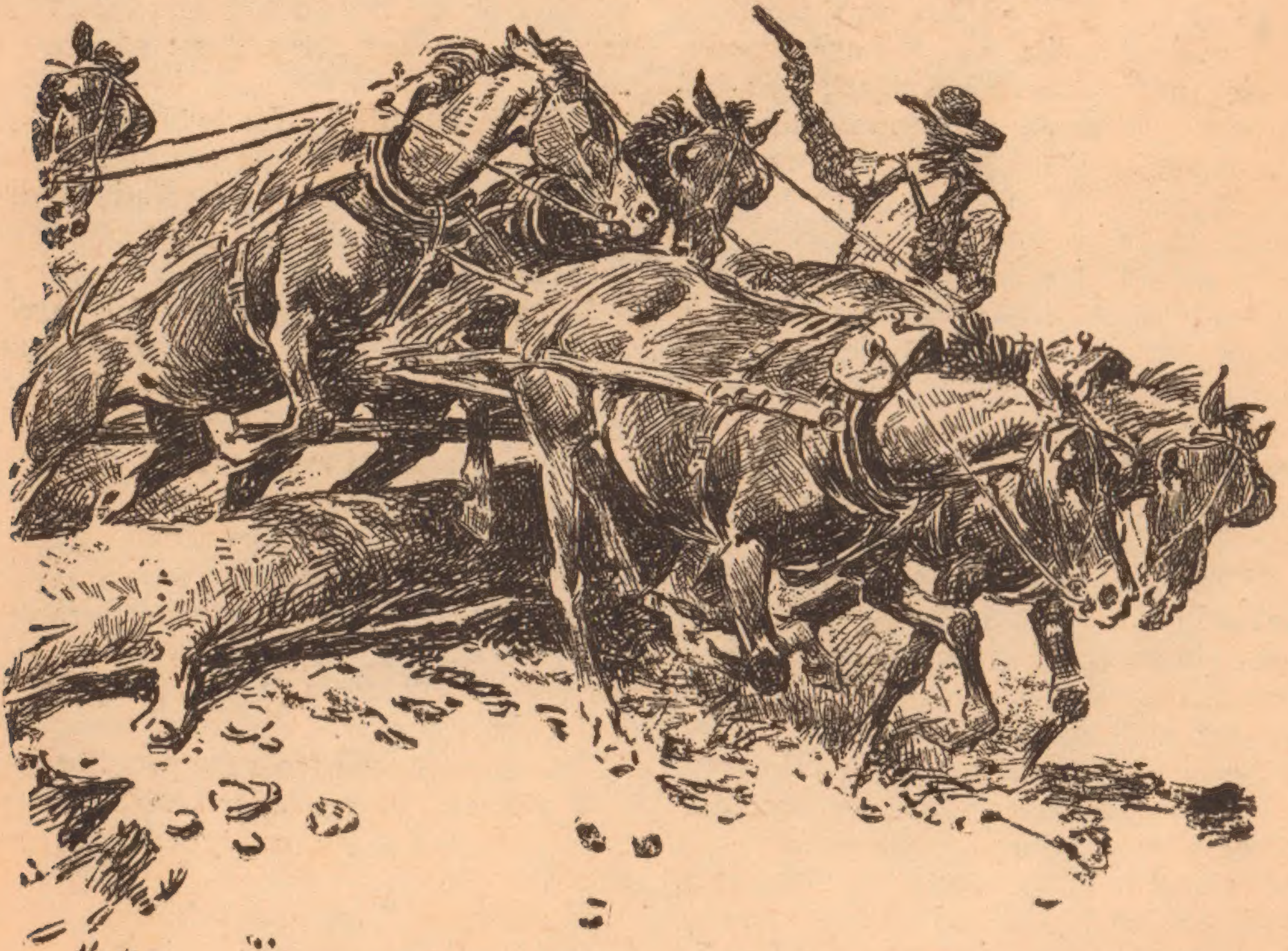
When Comanche John, the old buckskin gunslick, rode into Diamond Gulch, he wore his two Colts kind of careless-like. There'd be no hot-lead shanigans while he was around. That was his solemn promise to Parson Parker and he aimed to keep it—even if he had to hog-tie and scalp every vigilante from Bannack to Longknife Canyon!

HE WAS A TRIFLE UNDER average height—slouched and powerful. He sat with his chair tilted against the rear wall of the log saloon, his dusty hat tilted over his eyes, his face almost concealed by a tangle of black whiskers. From time to time he leaned over to shoot tobacco juice at a knothole in the rough floor, but always his eyes were alert, watching the door and the crowd that passed along the twilit street of Diamond Gulch, Montana Territory.

He was not a Pike's-Peaker—not one of those Missouri farmers who started for free land at the end of the Oregon Trail and turned north at news of Idaho and Montana gold. His skin, burned brown as Piegan moccasin, indicated years of Western sun and wind. He wore a fringed buckskin shirt fastened by thongs in place of buttons, trousers of grey homespun were stuffed in dusty jackboots. Around his waist, sagging from crossed belts, were two navy Colts.

The evening crowd of prospectors, bullwhackers and get-rich-quickers were dumping gold and greenbacks on the rough pine bar in exchange for tincups of raw trade-whiskey. The whiskered man seemed oblivious to the whooping crowd. He placidly chawed tobacco, sometimes appearing almost asleep, but whenever a man entered from the street his eyes became gray slits of suspicion.

A tall, closely shaved man came in carrying a Mormon candle in a brass stick, and hung it on a peg near the faro spread. He laid out a brace of derringers, undraped the box and chips, drew on black sleeve protectors. Then he announced with a ringing Harvard precision.



Comanche John racked back the hammers of his Colts. "Come on, ye yaller-gutted civet cats," he whooped. "It's Christmastime and we're servin' lead cranberries."

"Here's what you came from Pike County to find, gentlemen. Easy gold. And you don't even need to wet your feet digging it. Don't trample, gentlemen, there are chips enough for one and all."

Light from the Mormon candle appeared to be a little too bright for the whiskered man's fancy, so he moved his chair. He had just tilted it once more against the wall when someone entered that attracted his special attention.

The newcomer was a man of about thirty-five. He was over six feet, the breadth of his shoulders accentuated by his well-cut waistcoat of English kersemere.

His eyes came to rest on the whiskered man. He smiled a little, showing the tips of his perfect teeth. He walked across, hooked a chair with a polished boot toe, drew it over to an unused poker table, sat down. Then, instead of speaking directly to the whiskered one, he twisted his lips in a whimsical manner and quoted,

Comanche John rode to I-dee-ho
In the year of sixty-two
With a pal named Whisky Anderson
And one named Henry Drew.

The whiskered man answered, "This is Montana Territory, Mecklin, and Henry Drew is dead. Vigilante got him in Bannack, so I hear, and presented him with a necktie as a token o' their esteem. As for Comanche John—why I hear tell

he quit robbin' and reformed. Got religion and took to singin' psalms."

Field Mecklin laughed. A little jerk of his head, a flash of perfect teeth, then eyes pale and intent as ever.

"I'm not here representing any band of Bannack stranglers, John."

"I didn't recken you were," Comanche John drawled. "You always been a man that handled his own business in his own way, like me. Reckoned maybe that's why you came in here three deep." He jerked his head at the three gun-toters who had followed Mecklin inside and were now ranged at points of vantage around the room.

ONE OF THE MEN was especially noticeable, he was a huge, greasy-looking man with stringy black hair and thick, overhanging eyebrows, his face drawn out of shape by an old tomahawk wound that had cut deeply in his left cheekbone and ran down to his jaw.

John said, "There's Blackie Andros. Good old Blackie! The man that was coach robber with a gang in the Sierras and sold out his best friend for a poke o' vigilante gold. Thanks for bringin' him, because if this here tatey-tate o' our'n gets around to shootin', I don't know of a man I'd rather use for a target."

"There'll be no shooting," Field Mecklin said easily. He rested elbows on the green topped table, pressing the ends of his finely formed fingers together. "If I wanted to get rid of you, there'd be easier ways. For example, I could tell Buffalo Browers, and I think he'd have his vigilance committee around here in polka-time."

Comanche John made no comment. What the man said was true, of course. Field Mecklin was partner in the firm of Enfield & Mecklin which operated stage coaches between Fort Benton and Salt Lake city, and as head of such a stage coach empire it was improbable that he would deliberately expose himself to a pair of guns as notoriously swift and deadly as Comanche John's. Not even with Blackie Andros and those other two to back him up.

"Drink?" asked Field Mecklin.

Comanche John let his chair thump forward. He dragged it across the slivery floor and sat with one elbow on the table. Mecklin signaled to the bartender who paid not the least attention.

John bellowed, "Whiskey, damn-ee! Whiskey before I part your hair with a forty-four calibre comb!"

The bartender was a stoop-shouldered man in a reeking floursack apron with a holstered cap-and-ball pistol strapped ponderously around it. He walked to the end of the bar and observed John truculently.

John went on. "And none o' your heathen Blackfoot-pizen neither. This yere's a stagecoach king, and he craves the best."

The bartender hooked a jug of trade-whiskey by the handle and histed it to his forearm—reached for a brace of tincups . . .

"Not that bottle." John indicated a fat-bellied quart of Maryland rye that sat on the backbar for purely decorative purposes. "*That* bottle!"

"What bottle?"

Comanche John's right shoulder barely hitched. There was a heavy concussion. The smoking muzzle of a navy-six was visible above the edge of the table, and the bottle of Maryland rye stood on the backbar, its neck neatly severed.

"That one," said John calmly.

The gunshot created scarcely a ripple in the saloon. Some of the customers did not cease talking nor glance around. The bartender took down his precious bottle and carried it over.

John blew smoke from the pistol barrel, took a patent brass powder horn from his pocket, reloaded the empty cylinder, inserted a cap.

"I dare say," he drawled, sliding the navy back, "that you had a piece o' business on your mind when you came huntin' me out."

Mecklin nodded. "Do you have a gang out in the hills?"

'I told ye, Mecklin, I've ree-formed. Seen the errors of my ways. Robbery is a defiance o' the Bible. It ain't ethical in the moral sense. It gets a man to travelin' with bad companions, and it's dee-structive to the health o' the human body, what with the germs a man finds on buckshot these

days. Why, I even heered that the new legislature down in Virginny City was talkin' about passin' a law agin' it. Mecklin, if you're skeered on account of the gold your coaches are carryin' from this camp, just unhalter your cravat and breathe easy."

Mecklin barely smiled and said, "I know of a coach coming in with fifteen thousand in its strongbox."

Comanche John chawed for a while. He turned to shoot tobacco juice at his favorite knothole.

"Why that's mighty interestin'. Yep—might-ee interestin'. Fifteen thousand is a heap o' money. Think of all the good a man could do with fifteen thousand. Think o' churches he could build, the hymn books he could buy. By the way, just what coach has all that gold heaped on her?" John's eyes narrowed.

"It's not gold, it's greenbacks."

"*Them* things! They won't be worth more than five cents on the hundred when Lee takes Noo York."

"Perhaps the greenback has depreciated, but that fifteen thousand would still be worth seven or eight in gold, so it ought to be worth while."

There was a bowie-knife edge to John's voice when he asked, "Just what's your game, Mecklin?"

"What do you care as long as you get the money?'

John's eyes shifted across the room. Blackie Andros stood by the wall at one side of the faro spread, thumbs hooked in gun belts, the scar gash shadowed by candleflame seeming to cut his brutal, greasy face in half. The other two gunmen were pretending to watch a poker game. One of them, a rawboned man with thin, reddish hair called "Baldy" he remembered from Yellowjacket. He'd ramrodded a crooked card house there. The other was a stranger though his type was familiar enough—he was one of those sure of being on the strong side when he signs up.

If John had any idea of refusing Mecklin's proposition, knowledge of the bushmhack bullets that might come from the guns of those three deterred him.

He said, "I don't give a damn about anything as long as I get the fifteen thousand, Mecklin."

"That's what I thought."

Mecklin poured drinks from the decapitated bottle and spoke in clipped sentences,

"It's our Fort Benton coach. The one coming down. Due here tomorrow at dawn. We've instructed the driver to take the lower road through the Belts. There are four miles of narrow going along Longknife Canyon. A couple of deep fords where passengers may have to get out and push. It shouldn't be too much trouble for an old hand like you . . . The money will be in the strongbox. A word of warning—the driver and guard know nothing about it. You'll have to take your own chances. How many men will you have?"

John freshened his chaw. "I can't kee-rectly say, Mecklin. Thar might be just me—me and my two pistols, which o' course, makes three of us. And again thar might be as many as ten o' my boys up in the scrub pine. "

Mecklin stood up. "I can figure on it then?"

"With fifteen thousand in greenbacks waitin', you sure can!"

II

COMANCHE JOHN WATCHED Mecklin stride through the door with his gunmen following. He stood up and hitched his belts.

"Wal I'm damned! Fifteen thousand, and the owner of the stagecoach comes around beggin' me to lift it."

He went outside, still mulling the thing over. His talk about ten of his boys was pure fiction, of course. Since parting with Whisky Anderson down on the Beaverhead, he'd played a lone hand, most of the time following the path of rectitude through the good influence of his best friend, the Reverend Tom Parker, known affectionately from the Oregon Trail to Canada as "The Parson."

The gold camp of Diamond sprawled along the gulch wherever placer workings would let it. Above and below he could see elevated flumes and the growing hills of washed gravel dumped from the sluice

tails. Along one gutter of the winding street flowed a stream of milky water. A couple of jerkline ox teams with Conestoga wagons in tandem blocked the street before the W & I Mercantile; from Honey Blanche's place came music of a piano being banged in jigtime. A stream of moccasined and booted men passed along the pole sidewalks, and Comanche John fell in with them.

A log building with an unfinished roof stood thirty or forty paces uphill from the main drag. It was surmounted by a rude steeple. Candlelight came through oiled-paper windows. John opened the whipsawed plank door and went inside.

A skinny, gray-haired man was pegging legs in a flattened log to turn it into a bench. He peered with a pair of Old Testament eyes.

"Oh, thar ye be!"

"Yep, Parson, hyar I be.' John recognized his expression and made an exasperated gesture. "Quit lookin' at me that-away. I ain't kilt a man in more'n an hour."

"Killin's nothin' to joke about!" squacked the Parson in his parrot voice.

"I told ye I'd reformed, and reformed I be. Seein' all this Diamond Gulch gold ain't changed me a bit." John had been reforming off and on for the better part of two years now, ever since his first meeting with the Reverend Tom Parker near Fort Hall on the Oregon Trail. They had met near Bannack four weeks ago, and the Parson had talked him into journeying to Diamond for "a fresh start"——a suggestion that Comanche John had favored, at least partially because the Bannack vigilance committee happened to be on his trail.

John sat down and nudged at a heap of religious tracts with the toe of one jackboot,

"Parson, as a man o' the Lord, what's your opinion of a certain high-talkin' gent by the handle of Field Mecklin?"

"Of Enfield & Mecklin?"

"The same."

'A fine gentleman! A fine, God-fearing gentleman! One of the men who will build this great Western land of ours from a howling wilderness to——"

"Then you think any job Mr. Mecklin offered me would be honorable as is fitten a bleached sheep like myself."

"You ain't thinkin' of gettin a job!"

"Parson, I don't exactly cotton to the tone of that ree-mark. Not that workin' for Mecklin wouldn't lead me from the the narrow trail of rectitude."

"What sort of a job?"

'It's nature," said John, "is so ding blasted confidential that I don't dare breath a whisper of it to nobody."

COMANCHE JOHN left by the rear door of the Parson's half-completed mission and slouched up a rocky pathway to a pole corral at the edge of jackspruce timber. He waited at the gate of this open-air levery for the Mexican proprietor to catch Patches, his wiry little Nez Perce pony.

He mounted and headed down the Last Chance road until the camp disappeared around a bend, then he plunged uphill through quaking asp and serviceberry, following a gully which cut deeply into the mountainside.

It was dark and he could see the candlelights of Diamond, the reddish flame of torches lighting placer mines above and below town where sluices worked on a twenty-four hour schedule, tearing coarse gold from the bedrock, rushing to harvest a treasure that had been hoarded by the mountains through a million years.

Diamond disappeared around the swelling chest of the mountain. He followed a deer trail slanting to a gulch black with spruce. There was a small, transparent stream, a road beyond—the deeply rutted Fort Benton road.

He followed the ruts to the foot of Longknife Canyon. There he hid his horse in timber and went on afoot.

It was a narrow canyon. The crooked road crossed and recrossed the stream. It was after midnight when he sighted Frenchy's Station where horses were changed for the last lap to Diamond. There was a cabin, some pole corrals, a sod-roofed shed. A gaunt dog barked at him. He hammered the door and after a time someone moved inside. The door squeaked a few inches open. He was looking into the twin barrels of a sawed-off shotgun.

"I was throwed off my hoss," John said sadly, "and I figured maybe I could borrow one here."

The gun remained steady. "Who is thees?"—the man asked in a strong "Coyotie-French" accent.

"I'm Jones. John Jones. You know me, Frenchy. I got a claim yonder in Soapstone Gulch."

"Ah!" Frenchy put down the gun. "Come in *M'shu!*" He lifted the top of the sheet-metal stove and blew the coals until they brightened enough to light his bear-grease lamp. "Forgive me those gun, *M'shu,* but weeth all thees story about Comanche John I am what-you-call-it-nervass. Ha!"

The lamp made a smoky yellow light in the crude cabin. Frenchy was a medium-statured breed, fully dressed in buckskin despite the fact that he had just risen from his spruce-branch bunk.

John said, "You don't need to be scairt o' that varmit, Comanche John. I hear tell he got religion and had to quit chewin' tobacca on account of his mouth bein' so full of scripture. How about lendin' me that hoss?"

Frenchy gestured in sorrow. "All these cayuse in corral, she's coach horse of *compagnie.* If I len' one—my job *phouf! Sacre* damn. She's far walk to Soapstone, hey?"

"I'm goin' to town."

"But of course, *M'shu.* You will ride heem coach."

"They got orders not to take passengers between stations, ain't they?"

"Ha! I will tell them you are my fran—one beeg, hones' man. Thees way I will keep my job, and you will ride to Diamond Gulch. All is good."

'All is good!" repeated Comanche John, spitting at the ash hopper. He seated himself and spread jackboots expansively. "Glad you know an honest, Christian pilgrim when you see one. Share and share alike—that's my motto."

There was a slight dawn grayness along the horizon when steel coach tires rattled over the quartzite rocks of the road and the Concord rolled up from the spruce-shadowed darkness.

None of your old side-trail mudwagons —this coach was shiny and new, her leather springs creaking with payload, and there were six horses in the trees. The driver, Long-Lash Henry Travers, bellowed something to Frenchy and climbed down, tossing the ribbons to an Indian hostler who had been asleep in the horse shed. He strode to the shack with the shotgun guard following him. They found tea and poured some, cursing the Frenchman because he hadn't furnished coffee.

"Got heem passenger," said Frenchy. "My frand, John Jones from Soapstone Gulch."

"Your friend?" Long Lash Henry peered at John's whiskered face. "If he's your friend, all right." Then to John, "But you'll have to ride atop the hurricane, because we're loaded like an Irishman on St. Patrick's day."

"Gents," quoth John, "no seat would please me more."

He climbed to the luggage rack, back resting on a drummer's sample chest, jackboots dangling between guard and driver as the coach careened swiftly away behind six fresh horses.

After suitably cursing the road, the horses, and the quality of tobacco that season, Long Lash began whiling away the last weary hours of his drive by singing in a corroded voice,

"Co-man-che John rode to Beaver-head
In the fall of 'sixty-three,
To rob the coach at Bannack
And the sluices at Lone Tee-pee;
He shot up Eldorado
Chased the sheriff up a tree,
A faster man with six-guns
You seldom ever see." ... ...

THE GUARD SHIFTED his shotgun and grumbled, "I wish you'd quit singin' that damned doggerel. It makes me nervous."

"Didn't reckon a guard like Max Jobel would worry about old Comanche."

"If he tries to rob this coach I'll give you material for the last verse of that danged song. I'll let him have four ounces of number two buck right betwixt the eyes."

Max Jobel slapped his eight-gauge gun and squinted around at the passing shad-

ows. He rolled with the motion of the coach for a while, rib jostling John's jackboots. He turned then, fixing John in a professionally suspicious gaze.

"What's your line, stranger "

"Ever since the year o' forty-nine I wandered along the wild frontier relievin' the weary pilgrim of his load. Share and share alike, that's my motto."

The guard grumbled something. He kept glancing from time to time at John's face. "I seen you someplace before."

"Could be."

"You weren't down at Yallerjacket last year?"

"Not me. Last year I was at Lewiston, helpin' conduct a mission."

Long-Lash Henry looked startled. "A mission! You ain't a sky-pilot?"

"You see in me," proclaimed John reverently, "practically a man o' the cloth, and I don't mean that green cloth they put atop cyard tables, neither."

Max Jobel said, "If you're a Bible-shouter, it seems damn peculiar you'd be packin' two navy-sixes. And when you clumb up, I sort of imagined I saw notches in 'em."

"Reckon you never got far in scriptures, brother, iffen you don't recollect how an old rangy-tang by the handle of Jeremiah hauled out his muzzle-loader and cut loose on a couple of robber's-roost gamblin' camps named Sody and Gamorrah. Well sir, anything that's good enough for old Jeremiah is good enough for me."

"Hallaluja!" responded Long-Lash Henry, pulling back on the brake handle to slow the coach's descent to a ford of the creek. It rolled through with cold, mountain water making a hissing gurgle between the spokes, then he maneuvered the horses as they drew the coach one wheel at a time up the waist-high bank beyond

John chawed and watched the portion of the guard's craggy face that was visible beneath the brim of his sheared-beaver sombrero. It was obvious that the guard knew his business. He leaned forward tensely at the crossing, the shotgun tilted forward, watching the close-growing rose brambles for sign of trouble.

The canyon narrowed. There was sheer wall on one side and the creek on the other with bare room for the road between. It widened where a side canyon entered. There was a grove of trembly-leafed aspen trees with the road winding in and out. Another steep ford; another. The canyon was widening. Up ahead, John could see a pillar of rock and timber rising in a mass of solid shadow behind it. His pony waited in that timber . . .

"Gents," said John apolegetically, "I'm afraid I'll have to ask ye to halt this yere coach."

Long-Lash spun around, and stared into the muzzles of two navy Colts.

He froze to the ribbons, pulling back. He was bringing the leaders up fast with the wheelers and swing team overrunning them. It was a trifle downhill with no brake applied. The overloaded coach was rolling too fast.

"I wouldn't advise you to make that kind of mistake!" said John.

If Long-Lash had any idea of spilling the coach, he changed his mind at the steely sound of the words. Leather brake shoes ground on tires. The guard, Jobel, had not made a move. Didn't look around. Just sat, hunched forward a trifle, the shotgun between his knees, barrel pointed straight up.

John spoke, "Drop the shotgun overboard. Keep you hand off the triggers."

"All right," Jobel answered through his teeth, still looking straight down the black roadway.

John's voice, "Take it slow."

Max Jobel lifted the gun with his right hand gripping barrel. The barrel was still straight up. He slowly slid it down, turning it a trifle sidewise. Holding it that way there was no possible way his fingers could get to the triggers.

There was a nail on the footrest of the high seat. He let it slide inside the trigger guard, twisted the barrel back, aiming behind his shoulder, directly at the spot from which Comanche John's voice had come.

The shotgun leaped and roared, sending a blast of flame and buckshot from its eight-gauge barrel.

John had moved at the final instant. Jobel swung around, twisting the gun. Only one barrel had fired. He was trying to bring the nail to bear on the other trigger.

John's right hand navy traveled in a short, descending arc, the barrel struck, padded by Jobel's beaver hat. He let go the shotgun and pitched head foremost, striking the wheel and landing shoulder first on the ground.

CRASH OF THE SHOTGUN started the horses forward, snorting, eyes rolling, pulling at cross-purposes. The coach rolled crazily through rock and scrub timber. Men were cursing inside—a woman screamed. John clung to the hurricane rail, navies still in his hands.

The coach finally came to a stop, tilting steeply. There was a rattle from a door handle . . .

John's voice went over the side, "I got two navies up hyar. One for each side. It mightn't be too healthy for the first two or three that comes out."

The handle did not rattle again.

"Thar's a strongbox in the boot," John said to Long-Lash. "Just cinch your ribbons 'round the handbrake and toss it on the ground. I'll get down after it, turn around and pick up your guard. He'll want somethin' for his headache when he gets to Diamond, and if he's still worried about whar he seen me before, tell him I met him in a professional way three years ago near the town of Yuba City, Californy."

The strongbox was not heavy. John had no trouble carrying it uphill on his shoulder to the spot where Patches was tethered.

He tied it behind the saddle with a strip of whang leather and rode uphill across rocks where trailing would be hard. Dawn was making streaks of pink and orange across the vast foothill country to the east when he dismounted, tossed the strongbox down, and smashed the twin locks with two experts shots from a navy-six.

He dumped out its contents. Papers in sealed packets from the express company—no value in those. He would leave them on the express platform. Some letters bearing registry seals. He'd leave those also. The only other article was a packet addressed to "John B. Enfield & Mecklin, Diamond City, M.T." It bore the seal of the Planters Bank, St. Louis.

He opened the package. It contained greenbacks in tightly bound mint packets. There was more than fifteen thousand. It totalled twenty-two thousand four hundred. That was fifteen thousand actual value, due to the depreciation of the greenback.

He looked again at the name and address. John B. Enfield—that would be Field Mecklin's partner in the coach line. It was beginning to make sense.

"Yep," he said. "It looks like John B. Enfield was gettin' himself a hand offen a cold deck."

He rode cross-country to Diamond with the banknotes stuffed in a buckskin saddlebag. It was shorter that way, and he arrived above town in time to see the stagecoach roll to a stop before the Enfield & Mecklin barns. A crowd instantly started to gather. Even at that dawn hour robbery news traveled fast. He rode downhill. The Mexican hostler wasn't around. He unsaddled the pony himself, and making no special effort at concealment he went downhill, carrying the saddlebag under his arm. He crossed a deep trench where Chinese were moving gravel in wheelbarrows, passed among a clutter of outhouses to the rear of the Parson's mission.

It was cool and dim inside. He tossed the saddlebag in a corner, pulled off his jackboots. He was sound asleep on a wooden bench when the Parson came.

"There was a coach robbed!" the Parson announced in his parrot voice, glaring down on him.

John rolled to a sitting position, blinking his eyes. "Don't look at *me*. What coach was it?"

"You know what coach it was! The coach from Benton."

"*From* Benton? Hell, Parson, I'm better eddicated than that. Nobody but a Piegan squaw would rob an *incoming* coach. What would you think I was lookin' for—black-eyed beans and callyco?"

"You were lookin' for greenbacks."

"Them paper things the Union's been printin'? Parson, I can think of only one good use for greenbacks. Anyhow, what makes you so sure it was me? Why not Whisky Anderson? Or Muddy-Jack Blue Them highwaymen ain't been hung yet."

"The driver said it was you. Said he'd

been robbed by Comanche John."

"Just wanted to play the hero, claimin' to be robbed by somebody famous. Thought maybe a poet would build his name inside another verse to my song. Why, I recollect one time they had me robbin' a coach at Virginny City and a sluice at Yellowjacket two hundred mile away both on the same afternoon."

That was true, of course. A man gets a reputation like Comanche John's and every drunken prospector that loses his poke playing eucre with a Chinaman will come in claiming he's been robbed at the point of a gun by the most notorious man he can think of.

The Parson turned away. His eyes fell on the stuffed saddlebag.

"What's that?' '

"Looks mighty like what us boys used to called a buckskin saddlebag," yawned John.

"Where'd it come from?"

"I tossed her thar when I came in last night."

The Parson hefted it, untied the thongs. One of the packets of greenbacks came open, and the stiff new oblongs of paper spilled like cottonwood leaves in autum. He sighed. This evidence of John's return to evil seemed to sadden more than anger him. Wearily he gathered them, put them back, and with saddlebag under his arm, started for the door.

"Hold on. Whar ye goin'?"

"Out to give this money back."

"Like the devil ye are." John seized him by the front of his homespun jerkin and let him struggle a while. The Parson had a wiry strength and he was hard to hold. "Now listen. I didn't steal that money. Didn't I tell ye last night I was workin' for Field Mecklin? Well, that was the job. Stoppin' a Mecklin coach and liftin' the strongbox. *His* strongbox. I didn't tell you last night because it was the first honest job o' work I've had in fifteen year and I didn't want you draggin' out your black book and findin' out it was contrary to Levictus, chapter six, stanza fourteen and six to one on the case-cyards." The Parson seemed curious to hear more, so John let him go. "Though I'll admit I had that shotgun guard fooled into thinkin' it was the real thing."

"You're lyin' to me!"

"No, I ain't Parson," John said placidly. "However, I'll admit bein' party to somethin' that looks might-ee underhanded. You see——that package o' money was addressed to John Enfield."

"Ha!" cried the Parson, eyes wide. He discarded his idea of going outside. Instead he carried the saddlebag over and hid it beneath the pulpit. He came back saying, "Ha!" all over again. "Well, can't you see? he demanded.

"I'm beginning to see I had a mighty long horseback ride for nothin'," John grumbled.

"Can't you see why he wanted you to rob that coach? Old man Enfield died and since then I hear tell Mecklin has been tryin' to buy out his end. Young Jack Enfield's been having a time for himself makin' this north leg of the route pay out. Losin' that money would like as not put him right up Skunk Crick without a paddle." He strode to the door. "I'm goin' out to find young Jack Enfield —and by grab you better keep your fingers offen' that money."

"Glory be!" breathed John. "Glory, glory be!"

III

JACK ENFIELD WAS NOT IN Diamond. The stage office reported him to be in Last Chance. John watched the Parson ride down the gulch trail with the buckskin saddlebag. He cursed in selected words from the English, Spanish Comanche tongues, then curled up and slept until late afternoon when he arose for a dinner of cold boiled buffalo-jerky. It was about dark then, so he tilted his slouch hat over his eyes and found himself a comfortable loafing spot against the back wall of the Confederate States Saloon.

He barely had his chaw of blackstrap warmed up when Field Mecklin strode through the door.

Mecklin seemed to be calm, but the rage that filled him was shown in his tense, bloodless lips—in the bleak shine of his eyes.

He walked close and hissed through set

teeth, "I thought I told you to leave the country when you got that money! Do you realize there were a half dozen on that coach who might recognize you? They'll have the vigilance committee—"

"Might-ee nice o' you to worry about my health," chawed John.

"I don't give a good almighty damn about the state of your health. I'd gladly turn you over to that vigilance committee—provided they'd strangle you before you had a chance to talk."

John hee-hawed and beat dust from a leg of his homespun pants.

"Keep still, you fool." Mecklin in his anger had gone tense. He was not used to having people defy him. Veins stood out along his forehead. He kept nervously rubbing the palms of his hands just over the ivory butts of those two S & W rimfire pistols.

The pistols were of the new type using metallic ammunition, and there were extra cartridges in loops sewn on his belt.

John remained slouched, tilted on the hind legs of his chair. He chawed as before, but his eyes had become gray slits in his leather-brown face.

There was someone outside the door. Mecklin's face told him that, though he'd have known it anyway. The man wouldn't have come without his guncrew. John thumped forward in his chair and scraped it to one side to place Melkin between himself and the door. The door opened almost immediately and Baldy—the Yellowjacket gunman—sauntered in. He went over by the faro spread and stood, one shoulder resting on the wall, hands near guns, watching John with his long, predatory face. Blackie Andros came a moment later. It must have been planned because he walked directly to a spot far enough toward the bar so John would have difficulty watching them both at the same time.

After observing this, John drawled, "You're likely to get caught right in the middle of this shootout, you know."

Mecklin said, "You saw who the money was addressed to, didn't you?"

"Now, my schoolin'———"

"Jack Enfield knows you're in town. Suspicious that you are, anyway. His driver identified you. Enfield has a printshop dodger with your picture."

"Tell Jackie-boy to drop in and I'll buy him a drink."

"Get out! Get out of this town!" Mecklin hissed.

"I'll get out when *I* want to." Comanche spat a stream of tobacco juice accurately six inches short of Mecklin's polished boots. "When *I* want to. Without your advice."

Mecklin backed away, trembling with rage. After backing a third the distance across the room he turned and strode outside, muttering something to Blackie Andros from the side of his mouth.

Comanche John slouched toward the middle of the room. Andros watched him intently. He had one dirty thumb hooked in his belt. When John looked at Andros, the back of his head was turned toward Baldy.

It looked like the bald gunman's chance. He moved his hand toward his gun, forgetting the possibility of his movement being revealed in the backbar mirror.

John did not turn. There was a sag in one shoulder, a twist of his arm, the heavy concussion of a gun. To an onlooker it would almost seem that the long navy Colt had spun out on its own volition.

He had fired, aiming across his waist. The slug slammed Baldy back. His gun was unholstered, but he'd had no chance to aim. His eyes were off-focus. He struck a card table and his knees gave out, spilling him face foremost across the rough floor.

John scarcely looked at him. His whiskered jaw still revolved around the chaw of tobacco. Blackie Andros was bent in a gunfighter's crouch, hands hovering over the butts of his guns. He did not move. With extreme slowness he relaxed. His face, deep-cleft by its tomahawk scar, was at once frightened and cruel. He lifted his hands clear of his guns—kept them high.

The gunshot and sudden death had brought silence to the room. The silence hung for several seconds, broken only by the scrape of boots, the creak of chairs as card players changed positions.

John said to Blackie Andros, "You ain't changed since the old days down in

Californy, have ye, Blackie? Once a coward, always a coward, I say." He looked around at the others. "What do you think, boys? Did you see the bald varmint go for his gun?"

"Sho' he did," the faro dealer said in his Southern drawl. "He went for his gun. only the whiskered gent was too quick."

John slid the navy back in its holster. He walked to the door, booted it open, went outside.

The evening was cool with mountains silhouetted by a star-filled sky. He saw Field Mecklin standing on the pole sidewalk before the Jones & Stuart freight lines office. He made a sudden start on seeing that it was Comanche John who came out. There was no doubt that he had heard the single gunshot and thought as a matter of course that John with his incriminating knowledge had been silenced.

John called in a voice just loud enough to reach across the narrow street, "Your man's inside. The bald one. Maybe you'd like he should have a fitten, Christian burial. If ye do, I'll arrange it. Sort of a sideline o' mine."

Mecklin's face wore its mask of suppressed rage. He moved as though to step from the walk—and checked himself. His hands hovered over the ivory revolver butts but he didn't draw. Not even when John turned his back and slouched down the succession of high and low platform sidewalks that fronted that side of the gulch street.

JOHN KNEW that Mecklin was still watching him. He walked a hundred yards down the street, entered a hurdy-gurdy house where miners were raising dust from the floor, doing a California variety of polka with gaudily dressed girls at a dollar a dance.

He left by the back door, cut back along a hill trail among shanties and wikiups to the rear door of the mission.

No light inside. He felt his way through the bench-cluttered darkness, located flint and steel on the table, made sparks on tinder. The tinder flamed up and he lit a candle.

He sensed rather than heard the movement behind him. He started around, and his muscles froze at sound of a pistol hammer clicking back.

A voice he had never heard before said, "Put up your hands."

"Sure thing," drawled John. "Just take it calm." He lifted his hands, then turned slowly.

A young man with a pair of intent blue eyes was facing him with a navy-six held steadily, aimed at his heart. The hammer was back, and the young man's finger rode the trigger.

"It don't take much to set one o' them things off, you know."

His finger remained where it was. "Yes, I know."

"Playing a little seven-up Jerky and dumplings in the pot."

"I'm looking for my money."

"You must be Jack Enfield."

"I am." He jiggled the muzzle of the navy. "Where is it?"

"It's hid, and if you set off that powder-keg by accident I doubt you'll ever find it."

Enfield seemed to be thinking this over. He was a good-looking lad, about twenty-two, six feet or a trifle more with a clean grace about him. His skin was deeply tanned, but it lacked the leathery cast of John's who was fifteen or twenty years older. A lock of straw-colored hair hung on his forehead from beneath the brim of his cavalry hat.

"Unfasten your gun belts," he said. Then, when John started to lower both hands. "One hand's enough."

John's black whiskers parted in a smlie. He kept one hand high, while the other unfastened the belts. The heavy, holstered navies would have carried them to the floor, only he caught them between his knees. He picked up belts, holsters, guns in one big handful and thrust them forward.

They were momentarily in front of Enfield's gun. He shifted a trifle. For a fraction of time his aim was off. John swung a looped belt with a slight twist of the hand and caught the gun barrel, jerking it aside.

With an accompanying movement John booted one of the heavy log benches against Enfield's knees.

The young man was twisting to one side when the bench struck him. He was driven backward. There were spurs on his boots, and one of the big, Spanish rowels caught in the split-pole floor. He went down on his side, catching himself with an outflung left arm.

The pistol was still in his hand. He twisted it over, trying to aim over his thigh, but John had leaped the bench. His foot swung, connecting with Enfield's wrist, sending the gun bounding across the floor.

John jerked one of his own navies from its holster. He didn't bother to point it. Just stood, watching Enfield good-humoredly, making sure he didn't make a dive to retrieve his gun.

"Why don't you shoot?" Enfield cried. "You have me where you want me!"

"Why don't I? Maybe because I got me a hunk o' religion. Maybe because I like you a heap better'n your partner."

Enfield got up. The bench had bruised his knee and he hobbled on it. John took time to buckle his navies around his waist. When he was through he picked up Enfield's pistol, released the hammer, and tossed it to him.

"Put this away, son."

The young man caught the gun and stood staring at it a few seconds before holstering it. John freshened his chaw of tobacco and said,

"You'll get your money back, only my partner rode off with it thinkin' he'd find you in Last Chance."

"I don't understand. Why did you rob ——"

"Rob? I'm as innocent of robbery as a babe unborn. I was framed into liftin' that moneybox. Framed by Field Mecklin. Your partner."

Enfield jerked his head. The hardness in his eyes showed that John's words had only confirmed some suspicions he'd had all along.

He said, "Field Mecklin isn't my partner. The firm of Enfield & Mecklin never was a partnership. My father owned a stage line between Salt Lake and Soda Wells. When he sold to Ben Holladay he made an agreement with Mecklin to put in a line between Bannack and Last Chance, connecting with Mecklin's line that was already operating between Bannack and Salt Lake. Later my dad decided to connect with Diamond and Fort Benton. He had trouble with Mecklin over that. He wanted to give Dad the line from Last Chance to here, and take over the leg to Fort Benton himself. That would give him a stranglehold on both ends, so Dad refused. So he started running coaches despite Mecklin's objections. Six weeks ago Dad got killed in a runaway——I suppose you heard. I came up from Bannack to take over. That's when I found out how far we were in debt."

"To Mecklin?"

"To Gerstenhover of the Last Chance Bank, chiefly. He'd lent forty-eight thousand. There's a payment due. I need this money to cover it. It was some I had coming from my mother's estate. Mecklin has been trying to buy this north end of the line, so I suppose he thought losing this fifteen thousand would force my hand."

"You told Mecklin you were expecting the money?"

"No."

"Gerstenhover told him."

"Gerstenhover's not that kind of a man."

"He's a banker, ain't he? Listen to me, son—you'll never find such varmints in the road-agent business as you will inside of banks."

IV

ENFIELD FINGERED the butt of his navy, his face craggy, eyes narrowed.

"You're aimin' to hunt out Mecklin, I suppose," John said.

"What if I am?"

"Take it ca'am, son. Tangle with him tonight and he'll likely make wolf bait of ye."

They waited for the Parson to return. John went to sleep on a stool, feet on the table. Jack Enfield stood up and quietly went outside.

John watched with one eye open. When the door closed he took down his boots and followed. The young man went across the street and inside the stage company office. When five minutes passed with no more sign of him, John decided he had gone to

bed. He went back to the mission and lay down.

He was awakened by three pistol shots, one close on the other. There was nothing unusual about a little shooting in Diamond, but he got up, loosened his navies in their holsters, and went outside.

A knot of spectators were gathered near the lighted entrance of the two-story Territorial Hotel.

Two men came down the steps supporting a third man between them. Light fell on them from a saloon window. The wounded man was Jack Enfield. He knew one of the others—Long-Lash Henry Travers.

Enfield was scarcely recognizeable. His face looked pulpy as though someone had struck him repeatedly with a club so that blood oozed from his pores. His eyes were bruised and swelling shut. His left leg was wounded and the trouser leg stiffening from blood.

"You!" muttered Long-Lash Henry stopping abruptly when he recognized Comanche John.

"Don't get hostile. Your boss is a friend o' mine."

Sound of John's voice penetrated to Enfield's slugged brain. His eyes came to focus through puffed lids.

"Maybe I should have taken your advice," he said with an attempt at smiling.

"I take it you found Mecklin."

"At the Territorial House. His men tried to get me in the back. Guess I was lucky. Just leg wound. I couldn't fight three of 'em."

He went into his slugged storpor again. Long-Lash said,

"It was Mecklin. Got him down and booted him in the face. Every time his boot struck the blood flew." He named Mecklin a string of vile words. Then, defensively—"I couldn't do nothin'. One man can't fight a dozen gunmen and that's how many Mecklin has around if you counted 'em all."

"Better get the lad to the barn, John said, tilting his head toward the stage office.

Young Jack Enfield's injuries didn't seem so bad once the blood was washed away. The bullet wound had cut deeply through the flesh of his thigh, but it had not touched bone or large artery. John got the caked blood washed away and bound it with a poultice of hot sage leaves.

"Best thing that ever happened to him," John said, thumbing at the wound. "It'll keep him down till he has a chance to think things over. He's no artist with a gun, I found that out tonight."

V

THE PARSON RETURNED NEXT afternoon with the saddlebag of greenbacks, and the day following Jack Enfield felt good enough to limp to Gerstenhoven's office and make a twelve thousand dollar payment on his loan—or eighteen thousand in greenbacks, for the loan, like all along that gold frontier, was made in gold equivalent.

Gerstenhover was a medium tall, heavy German from St. Louis with intensely blue eyes and a good-natured face. He was no doubt more shrewd than he gave the appearance of being.

"I vas so afraid for you, Jackie," he said, counting the greenbacks. "Yah. After I hear of stagecoach robbery. I am really poor man, you understand." He dipped a quill pen and wrote a receipt, signing his name with an intricate assortment of broad strokes and flourishes. Afterward he put the money inside a tin box which he locked, and in turn placed in a drawer of his ornate walnut desk which he also locked. "Ach!—me and my shoestring business! Never should I lend to my friends. With enemies—those if they do not pay it is good to foreclose, yah. But mine friends! If you do not pay what is there left for me to do I have mine indebtednesses, too."

John had been standing in the door. He slouched over and sat on the edge of the ornate desk. "If you get too hard up you could always buy a year's grubstake by cashing in that rock in your necktie."

"Ho! You just joke." Gerstenhover touched the big diamond in his tie. "You make joke. This is just cheap bauble. I am poor man."

Gerstenhover leaned back, drumming the desk with stubby pink fingers. He looked

in John's whiskered face. "I haff seen you someplace before?"

"Not less you've been to church lately."

Gerstenhover chuckled deep in his thick throat. "I haff heard that black-whiskered man robbed Fort Benton coach. Maybe Comanche John. Yah, that was name—Comanche John? I have also heard this Comanche John was wanted by Bannack vigilantes."

"You ain't accusin' me o' bein' a varmint like that!"

"Ho!"—like you I only make joke. Any friend of Jackie iss a friend of mine."

They went outside, Enfield folding his receipt, putting it in a Spanish leather wallet.

"Bank-keepin' highgrader!" growled John.

"He was my father's best friend," Enfield said in mild reproach. "You're just suspicious of bankers in general. Gerstenhover's a good Dutchman."

"How do ye aim to get the next twelve thousand?"

"Out of the company profits."

"Is the coach business *that* good?" John asked incredulously.

"It's that good—if everything goes right."

Everything did not go right. Next night the coach from Last Chance rolled in riddled with bullets, the shotgun guard lying dead on the floor inside, and the money gone. Two days later the outbound coach for Benton was robbed of a thousand ounce gold shipment. Then, at the end of the week, Field Mecklin announced inauguration of an extension to his line so it would reach both Last Chance and Diamon Gulch.

Mecklin next journeyed to Fort Benton where he was reported making an agreement with Craft Burroughs, a big-time Missouri River fur trader and steamboat owner. He returned, and the following week the Territorial News from Last Chance published a story predicting a "New, fast, one-company service under the Mecklin banner joining the steamboats of the Missouri with the Ben Holladay coach line to California.

In the meantime, trouble for Enfield coaches continued. It became difficult to hire men, even at double wages, so Comanche John hired out, riding shotgun with Long-Lash Henry Travers.

He returned, tired and dusty after his third trip, and paused for a bottle of beer at the Confederate States saloon. A skinny, red-whiskered man grinned and sidled up to him——

"Well, John!"

The familiar voice made him spin around with a bellow of delight.

"You old he-wolf!" John roared, stamping his bootheels. "Ye mangy old he-wolf. I heered them stranglin vigilantes got ye over at Hellgate a month ago."

"Why, they had some idees, but they didn't have fast enough hosses to go with 'em, so here I be."

They pumped each other's hands—Comanche John and Whisky Anderson.

"You hear that song they writ about us?

'Comanche John rode to I-dee-ho
In the year of 'Sixty-two
With a pal named Whisky Anderson
And one named Henry Drew——'"

"I heard her."

"What ye doin' here?" John's eyes narrowed down. "We been havin' a considerable of coach-robbery lately. Enfield coaches, that is. Mecklin's outfits seem to be makin' her all right."

"You know my business, John. Gold is whar you find it, and if I happen to find it on an Enfield coach——"

"I been ridin' shotgun on that Benton run now and again," John said significantly.

"So I heered." Whisky Anderson peered intently in John's eyes. "You must have a mighty good idee what coaches it would pay to rob."

"Mebby, but that's not why I'm ridin' her."

Whiskey Anderson chuckled, peering with squinty gray-green eyes as though there was always more on his mind than ever reached his lips.

"John, you was born a ring-tailed roarer and it's hard to learn an old wolf to tend sheep, as the sayin' goes. I know how you stand here in Diamond, how you been goin' to church and hodnobbin' with stagecoach owners, but I

knowed ye in I-dee-ho, and before that in Californy. Hell, man, your reputation wouldn't let you be a Sunday-goin' Samaritin even if you et one o' them Bibles, paper horsehide cover and all."

"Just what you got on your mind, Whisky?"

"Gold."

"Whar?

"On a stagecoach. One o' them Enfield Concords. The one headed for Benton tomorrow morning."

John had heard of no gold shipment going out, but of course he'd only that hour returned after a three-day absence from camp.

"Could be. But it ain't good sense, comin' to me. Likely I'll be ridin' guard on that coach." John nudged him and chuckled. I'm a mighty potent shotgun guard. Man that's been on the wrong side of the road as often as I have sort of get so he senses whar the danger is, and which o' the road-agents he ought to shoot first, which one second, and so on. The delicate touch, you understand."

"You wouldn't shoot *me!*"

John scratched his whiskers. "Well, I dunno. You see, I've reformed. Used to be I just took gold wherever I found her. But I quit that. True, I still lift a poke here or thar, but generally from varmints. Not from good lads like Jack Enfield." Then he asked, "Who sent you around for me "

"Nobody. Blackie Andros said he needed a couple more men, and when I heered you was in the country . . ."

"Blackie Andros!" John spat to get the taste of his name out of his mouth. "That civet-cat! You look out for him or he'll make vigilante bait out of you for the ree-ward like he did that Ho Parker gang down in the Sierras."

After a couple of drinks, John clomped up the sidewalk through the fresh coolness of the mountain evening, finding Jack Enfield in his invoice-cluttered office at the stage station.

"Hello," Enfield said.

"Gold shipment going out tomorrow I hear."

The question apparently startled the young man. He nodded, "Why, yes. But I'd like to know how in the devil you found out."

"Road agent told me."

"Who was he?"

"Oh, one o' Blackie Andros' men. Came around to hire me."

JACK ENFIELD thought it over, leaning back, eyes on the rough-board wall. His mind was running through the various men in his employ, wondering which had furnished the information.

He said, "It was a thousand-ounce shipment we have to get to Benton before the Cree Chief sails for St. Louis. Skip Fraser's. The cleanup from his Royal Crown placer over at Last Chance. On its way here now. We were going to store it overnight and toss it on the coach tomorrow morning. Long-Lash Henry's coach with you riding shotgun. Did this, ah, road agent friend of yours know you'd come and tell me?"

"He has a fair idee."

"Then we'll put the gold through on schedule. They'll expect us to delay it now that we've been warned."

John wasn't exactly sure that this thinking was as tricky as Enfield considered it to be. He climbed the rocky path to the mission with face unusually troubled. The Parson was lighting up the grease-dips, getting ready for his nightly meeting. Things weren't going well for the Parson, either. He'd been getting no more than two dozen of Diamond's rough citizens to attend, and half of those were generally drunks, attracted by the singing, who immediately started bellowing for likker and the girls.

"How's business with the sinners?" John asked, getting the jack and pulling his boots off.

"Doin' a good funeral business," moaned the Parson, "but a funeral's a mighty tardy place for the savin' of souls from the fires of eternal damnation."

"Amen and hallelujh!" intoned Comanche John. "And the way this stagecoach business is headed, you'll have plenty funerals more."

The meeting was over before midnight, and John had been snoring for two hours when Whisky Anderson prowled inside,

calling his name. John lighted a candle.

"What d'ye want?" he asked. "Go ahead. You can talk in front o' the Parson."

"I just wanted to let you know that I didn't tell Blackie or anybody else about the talk we had. And as for me, I said he could go to hell with his stick-up!"

"Amen!" quoth the Parson, standing like a plucked buzzard with bare legs sticking from his nightshirt. "Another convert from the paths of wretchedness. Another gun-packin' pilgrim for the army o' the Lord."

"I ain't gone that far," said Whisky uncharitably. "I just couldn't see me linin' myself up with Blackie Andros on one side o' me and Comanche John on the other. That was too much like ridin' a powder-wagon with a bob-tailed fuse."

When he was gone, John dressed and crossed to the stage station.

There was a candle burning inside but no one in sight. He tried the door. It was barred. He rapped. Max Jobel was sitting guard in the darkened room next to the office. He saw who it was and walked over with a surly attitude to lift the bar. Jobel had never forgiven Comanche John for bashing him that night in Longknife Canyon, and he'd have gone to Buffalo Browers, head of the vigilantes, the first day if it hadn't been for Enfield's order not to.

"Enfield around?" John asked.

"In his room," Jobel grunted. He backed up in a way that blocked the stairs, sawed-off shotgun across his arm. "What do you want of him?"

"That," said John, "happens to be none of your damned business." When Jobel still blocked the way, John roared, "Git out o' my way!"

Jobel edged over enough to let him pass. John stood where he was. He had survived well along this wild, gunman's country, and his survival was partly due to an instinct for danger. And that instinct led him to suspect a charge of buckshot from Jobel's gun when his back turned.

Jack Enfield had awakened at the commotion and walked barefoot to the head of the stirs.

"What's going on?"

Jobel put down the gun and answered in a surly, defensive voice, "You told me not to let anybody in."

"That's all right." Then to John, "Come on up."

John went inside the dinky room, closing its plank door before telling Enfield of Whisky Anderson's visit.

"You believe him?" Enfield asked. "They could have sent him back to tell you that just so we'd think we were safe and send the gold through tomorrow."

"Could be. Only Whisky's always been honest with me."

Enfield thought it over.

"Are you sending her through "

"No. Chances are he's telling the truth. I think they'll make a try for it. I'll send the gold through later in the week." He chuckled grimly. "Tomorrow instead of gold we'll give that gang the biggest damned surprise of their lives."

VI

THE BENTON coach left at dawn with Long-Lash and Comanche John on the high seat, but inside, instead of the usual pay-load was Jack Enfield, Max Jobel, and the shotgun guard from the Virginia City end, a quiet man of middle age by the name of Quinlan.

They expected trouble in the timber of Diamond Gulch, or in Longknife Canyon, but the swing station at Frenchy's was reached without incident. Round-topped mountains with spotty timber lay beyond, then grassy hills, and after that, prairie which stretched to a limitless, purple horizon. At intervals the coach would draw up to a dinky shanty and corrals for a change of horses, then it would roll on, keeping to schedule.

The home station at Sage Coulee was reached at late afternoon.

At Sage there was a long log cabin with a dirt and pole roof, and extensive assortment of sheds and corrals, a reservoir with its little lake and circling efflorescence of alkali that looked like spilt baking soda.

Ordinarily Long-Lash spent the night at Sage Station, but this time he merely ate the meal of beans and fried antelope

that the station-keeper's Blackfoot squaw placed on the table, and climbed inside with Enfield, Jobel and Quinlan. The coach rolled on with the new driver—"Dandy-Dave" Tilford in the seat.

Darkness settled with thunder and black clouds rolling up from the prairie. Midnight found them on Shonkin Creek with the trail winding through cottonwods, past a corral and half-completed log station being put up by Field Mecklin, to Rosard's trading post where a hundred-tepee encampment of Assiniboines could be seen by repeated lightning flashes. Scattering drops of rain fell, making on odor of wet dust. Dawn was breaking when they headed down the miles of bluff road to Fort Benton.

"Skunked!" growled Max Jobel in ill temper, dragging himself outside as the coach was hauled across the Missouri on a current-operated ferry. He said to Enfield, "Probably raided the station and took that gold as soon as we were out of the way."

Benton lay on the flats, uphill from warehouses and log docks where stern-wheel riverboats were moored.

There was little rest. Fresh horses were hitched, a new driver took over, express was piled in the rear boot and lashed to the top.

A young woman was waiting in the stage office when Jack Enfield went in. There was a trunk and several carpetbags on the floor at her feet.

For a moment his eyes were blinded by the bright, dawn sunshine, then he saw that she was young, about average height, slim. What he saw over and above that was her fresh beauty, her unpainted beauty which a man gets to hungering for after spending a couple of years in the brawling boom-camps of the gold frontier.

"You're with the coach company?" she asked in a voice pitched lower than most women.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I wanted passage on the Diamond coach. The agent said I'd have to wait and see. Something about a 'company load' he hadn't expected. I was left behind yesterday because there wasn't room."

Enfield said mildly, "The downgoing coaches are always crowded. Sometimes the space is spoken for a week in advance."

"But he told me I could get passage today."

"I'm not the agent. It's up to the agent to distribute space."

She was becoming angry—he could tell that by the way her slim hands gripped the handle of her parasol, by the tight line of her lips.

"Sir! I'm not willing to spend a second night in this—this——" She gestured around her at the frontier town. "I'm not going to be left here another day waiting for passage. If I'm not given a seat on this coach I'll take it up personally with Mr. Field Mecklin."

"He's a friend of yours?"

He said gently, "Mr. Mecklin is no longer associated with this stage line."

"Your sign says——"

"It says Enfield & Mecklin. We'll have to paint a new one. It is now the Enfield stage line. I should have told you—I'm Jack Enfield."

Oh! Well, I'll not beg for a seat on your coach.",

He decided to smile. It was a good smile, and it quieted her anger.

"I wouldn't want you to beg. There's no reason why you should. I run a business, and you're a customer. I guess if you want passage to Diamond you can have it. In fact, if you wanted passage yesterday it should have been given to you. It's always been our policy to favor women ——your kind of women. We don't often get a chance to haul 'em."

She colored a trifle at reference to her "kind of women."

She said, "Isn't Mr. Mecklin in Diamond now?"

"I haven't seen him for a week, ma'am."

Her brows drew together over her nose. It was a small nose, perfectly formed, with just a few freckles across its bridge.

He said, "The coach goes on to Last Chance. We don't have a decent hotel in Diamond, but there's an extra fine place they just finished building in Last Chance. If you're afraid somebody won't be waiting for you——"

"My stepfather and mother will be in Diamond. Mr. and Mrs. Gerstenhover."

He nodded, "I saw Mr. Gerstenhover only yesterday." He added, Mr. Gerstenhover was one of my father's best friends."

The information seemed to place them on a different plane.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Not about . . . I'm sorry I was so unpleasant."

"It's not easy for a girl to travel in this country. Not when she's alone."

She introduced herself then. She was Bess McGrail. Her widowed mother had married Gerstenhover in St. Louis and left with him on a journey whose original destination was Sacramento, but had finally ended in Diamond Gulch. For the past two years Bess McGrail had lived with her uncle, Colonel Stephen McGrail of the Union Army, stationed at St. Joseph, Missouri, but he had insisted on her departure because of the unsettled conditions caused by the invasion of Confederate General Sterling Price from Arkansas.

It seemed strange—this girl seeking safety in a wild frontier, terrorized on one side by Blackfeet, and on the other by organized gangs of bandits.

She did not mentioned Field Mecklin again . . .

THE COACH set out in half an hour. It was one of the big, new Concords made to squeeze in as many as ten or eleven passengers, but one of the cross-seats had been removed to make room for rush mail and express., so it carried nine with Long-Lash clinging to the hurricane.

They passed the upcoming coach at Sage Station, and paused at that place about dark where Long-Lash took over, piloting the coach through moonlit night.

Hours passed, and Comanche John dozed.

He jerked awake with the sudden movement of Long-Lash as he swung the lead team from the road.

"What the devil?" The words were bumped out of John as he clutched with one hand, barely keeping his seat as the coach started a wild, rolling ride across the hummocky prairie.

"Gunshine yonder," Long-Lash answered. "Beyond that sandrock."

The sandrock was a projecting strata with the road winding closely around it. At the right was a little swale covered spottily with sage funnelling into the upper end of a dry wash. It was the protection of the dry wash that Long-Lash was trying to reach.

Men were shouting inside. Questions no one bothered to answer.

Comanche John had the shotgun between his knees. He thrust it muzzle down in its wagon scabbard, taking instead one of those new breech-loading German rifles that used .34 calibre metallic ammunition.

He rolled belly down to the top of the coach, finding a spot between a box of Baker Co. "time freight" and the girl's lashed-down trunk.

Men were on the move back of the sandrock. It was less than a hundred yards away. He could see shadow, the gleam of gunmetal in moonlight. Men were on horseback, galloping across the swale disappearing over the edge of the dry wash.

Long-Lash saw they were cut off from the wash as he swung his team to the right. He was going to make a try for it with the sandrock on one side and the dry wash on the other.

A gun's high, angry crack asserted itself over the thunder of hoofs and coach wheels. John fired at its powder flash from atop the pitching coach. Other rifles cut loose from the sandrock—from the edge of the wash. Bullets tore splinters, thudded the coach. John kept stuffing cartridges in the breech of the rifle, firing . . . .

The horses were on a dead run. One of the swing team was hit. The poor animal stumbled and went down, the wheel team piling over him.

The coach skidded half way around, balanced for a moment on two wheels. Then, with a movement that seemed leisurely after the wild, pitching ride, it fell to its side.

Comanche John was flung face down in bunchgrass and sage. The rifle was gone —batted from his hands, but the navies were safe.

He drew, crouching on one knee.

Blackie Andros' voice came across the night, shouting orders.

A horse and rider was in view at one end of the sandrock. Three more a second later. Then another group from the upper end of the natural fort.

John racked back the hammers. "Come on, ye yaller-gutted civet cats," he whooped. "It's Christmastime and we're servin' lead cranberries."

The first four riders had fanned out, coming on the run. John held his fire as distance diminished. The navies roared, rocking his hands. He fired twice more—once with each pistol.

One man was batted backward. He fell and was dragged by his foot, shoulders and arms flopping as they bounded along the ground. The man beside him spilled head foremost. Another rider drew his horse to a sliding stop and went galloping in flight.

The other man was still coming on.

He was clinging flat against the horse, using the animal's neck and head for protection. Moonlight shone on the short barrel of the shotgun he carried in one hand.

The horse veered, bringing the man to view. He turned, aiming the sawed-off. John's navies roared, driving the man back so the sawed-off sent its shot roaring overhead.

The fellow hit the ground and rolled almost to John's feet.

The other group of riders had swung away at the unexpected fury of the gunfire which was now coming from behind the coach. Quinlan, that shotgun guard from Virginia City, was cursing the way men do when they're in considerable pain.

John backed to the coach, finding the shot gun. Only a couple of loads were left in his navies. No use wasting them shooting at gun flashes. A shotgun loaded with buck was another matter—a squaw-gun like that did her own aiming.

One of the men in the dry wash had bellied up until he was only forty or fifty yards off. John waited for the flash of his gun. He caught the light of it against the front bead of the eight-gauge.

The shotgun boomed, its recoil spinning John halfway around. He could hear the man's scream and sucking cry—could see him stumble into sight torn by a half-dozen buckshot and go face first to the prairie sod.

"Come on, ye back-shootin' bushwhackers," John bellowed. "Come on a dozen more o' ye while I play a tune on this California calliope."

He centered another flash and sent another charge that tore dust and sod from the edge of the wash without known result.

"I wish the Parson was hyar. Thar's nothin' like a splatter-gun with buck in her to catch up with a sinner and teach him the ways o' righteousness."

It settled down to steady shooting, the coach pinned by crossfire. Long-Lash Henry crouched by one of the dying horses, cursing the attackers.

"I can abide killin' a man, but any man that assassinates a hoss is next kin to a blow-snake."

John didn't answer. He was bellying across the ground, keeping the fallen coach between himself and the sandrock, finding concealment in sage clumps from the men in the dry wash.

A little rise of earth hid him, then it was open ground for a dozen yards. Beneath him he could see the abrupt, six-foot descent to the wash, its bottom a tangle of sage and dry-pooled snakeweed.

He slid down, digging heels in dry dirt.

"John?" said a voice close by in shadow.

"Yes," he grunted.

Evidently there was one of the bushwhackers named John.

He could see no one. The man was beyond a bend in the steep bank. An instant later his shadow became visible.

John waited, navy ready. At the last instant the man seemed to realize this was not the "John" he expected.

HIS GUN SHATTERED the air so close that bits of powder burned John's cheeks, but the man was flinging himself back at the same moment, and the bullet thudded dirt up the bank.

John stood with shoulders flattened, aiming a navy at arm's length, ready for the next movement. He spoke,

"I'm John, all right. I'm Comanche John, and I'm quite a hand at killin' dry-gulchers. Now listen careful, and I'll tell

ye just what to do so you'll be around for ffapjacks tomorrow mornin'. You toss your gun down, stick both hands out straight from that bank so I can see they're empty. Then came along so I can squint at your face."

Mention of that name "Comanche John' brought a singularly rapid response. The gun dropped. John picked it up, grunted with satisfaction to see there were four loads still in it, and thrust it in the band of his homespuns. The man's hands were in sight, thrust horizontally.

"All right, Lazarus," quoth John, "ye can come forth now."

He looked at the man's long, loose-mouthed face. A saloon loafer from Diamond."

"Don't shoot," he whined. "You promised."

"Whar's your boys?"

"Fisher and Alrod's up the gulch, Mex is dead."

"Good for him. You lead the way and we'll see what we can do about Fisher and Alrod."

The loose-mouthed man led him through rattling snakeweed.

He covered thirty or forty yards. A man spoke his name,

"Beggs?"

"Yeh." He walked on, prodded by John's navies.

"Who were you talkin' to?"

John said, "Me. Comanche John. Just drop your implements o' destruction, gents, and put your continued existence down to the fact that this'n is one o' my charitable moods."

Shooting was intermittent from stage-coach and sandrock. Dawn was commencing to gray the stars.

"Enfield!" John called.

Enfield's voice, "Yes. Where are you "

"Out hyar in the wash, trappin' skunks. Got three—t'other's a customer for the Parson. You and the gal crawl over. Keep behind the coach and ye'll be safe enough."

"I can't leave——"

"Bring her over. Then go back and do what ye damned please. They'll make wolf bait of you for sure if you stay there."

VII

JACK ENFIELD had awakened a moment before the coach commenced its wild ride, and he sensed instantly what was the matter.

His first thought was of Bess McGrail, and he cursed himself for giving her passage.

He expected her to scream, faint, weep and do the other things expected of women in distress. But she did none of them.

Bullets ripped through the coach, three or four of them, and it was almost a relief when the vehicle rammed to a stop and crashed over. People were a tangled mass, trying to clamber from door and windows, but there was temporary safety in the thick, oak bottom.

Once outside she did not scrabble for cover as a couple of the male passengers did. She sat quite straight, her shoulder pressing his arm, watching him methodically aim and fire his pistol.

In response to John's suggestion, he took her across the open ground. There was no particular danger, coach and fallen horses obscuring them from the sandrock.

It was only in the safety of the wash that she showed a sign of weakening. There she clutched tight to Enfield's arm while repeated shudders ran through her body.

"These lads have been good enough to leave some hosses down the coulee," John drawled. "Get her down to Frenchy's. We'll put the run on the rest o' those boys, come daylight."

They were half-tamed Indian ponies. It was impossible for the girl to ride side-saddle and she was not wearing a riding skirt.

"Go ahead," Enfield said. "This is no time for modesty."

He could sense the flush of her cheeks as he held the horse on short halter, looking the other way. After a couple of false movements, she mounted. He could tell that she'd ridden before.

"All right?"

"Yes," she whispered.

They rode together along the deepening bottom of the dry wash,then over its rim to the prairie.

Sound of shooting had stopped. Dawn was casting a gray light over the bench land. The could make out the overturned coach with men standing near. The attackers were evidently gone.

"Should we go back?" Enfield asked.

"No." She laid her hand on his arm. "Please, I'd rather not."

He understood. She didn't want them to see her riding man-fashion.

They rode side by side as the prairie pinched out between foothills. The sun came up with warm, slanting rays. Frenchy's came in sight through scattered spruce timber.

Enfield dismounted, lifted Bess McGrail from her horse. She pushed herself away when he seemed to hold her a second, and spent some time smoothing her long, brown traveling skirt.

"What you must think of me!" she said.

"I think you are the prettiest girl I ever saw."

His words made her flush.

"You mustn't think anything of riding that way, ma'am. Out in this country girls ride just about the same as men." He pointed to the shack. "That's our swing station yonder. Frenchy'll make tea and a bite o' breakfast. Rest of the boys should be along pretty soon. I'll ride to town and come back with a coach."

The relief coach arrived about noon with Enfield himself driving, and heavy-set Gerstenhover in the high seat beside him.

Gerstenhover lumbered down, opening his arms for the girl.

"Ach, mine Bess! Mine pretty Bess! If I was young man again would I marry your mama? I ask it—*nein.*"

She seemed pleased to see him. Enfield went to the door of the shack. He stopped abruptly, seeing a dead man on the floor. It was Quinlan, the small shotgun guard from Virginia City.

"Any more?" he asked John grimly.

"That long-geared drummer was nicked, but he ain't hurt like he pretends. If he is, let him gulp some o' that hoss-medicine he's sellin'."

"Where are those men you caught in the dry wash?"

"Turned 'em loose." Then defensively, "I don't reckon I got the reputation to do much testifyin' before a vigilance committee."

The citizens of Diamond turned out three hundred strong to greet the coach. "Hear it was Comanche John's gang," somebody kept saying, over and over.

"Ought to hang the killin' pup," a prospector growled. "What's wrong with the vigilantes that they let a man like that operate?"

They forgot about Comanche John when the coach door opened, and the girl stepped out, hand on Gerstenhover's arm. A lane opened through the crowd. Someone was pushing that way. Tall, heavy-shouldered Field Mecklin.

"My dear!" he said, beaming. "Bess! If I'd only known . . .

"It's all right," she said, letting go her stepfather's arm and hurrying to meet him. She let him take both her hands.

He said, "But you said you'd take the Holladay coach to Fort Hall."

"Uncle Stephen thought the steamboat would be safer."

Enfield watched them. His face was tense, muscles knotted at the sides of his jaw. She had mentioned Mecklin at Fort Benton, but he thought him only a casual acquaintance. Obviously he was much more.

Enfield turned away.

"You ain't going to let him have her?" John growled.

"She means nothing to me. I got her here safely."

"Mr. Enfield!" He hesitated a moment before turning when she spoke. She was coming toward him. "I didn't thank you."

"It's all right. I should be apologizing for not giving better protection." He smiled through the thin line of his lips. "Competition is a little tough in the stagecoach business, you know."

Mecklin was following. He chose to ignore the remark."

He spoke, "Old man! I'll never be able to thank you enough. Miss McGrail is my future wife, you know."

He spoke the words with booming sincerity. Mecklin was a good actor; even his eyes seemed grateful.

Gerstenhover said, "Ach, yes. Be

friends, boys. Shake hands, yah? What is a little misunderstanding between gentlemen?"

"I'm not so sure," said Enfield, "that I'm a gentleman."

THE GOLD went out on next morning's stage, reaching Benton without incident.

"They'll lie low for a while," Long-Lash predicted, but he was wrong. Next morning the southbound coach to Last Chance was robbed of a four-thousand-dollar shipment.

"It's peculiar," Enfield said to the glum group in the stage office. It's *damned* peculiar how they always know which stage to stop."

Comanche felt several pairs of eyes and he said, "I was in town yestiddy at the hour that coach was robbed, and I got the Parson as witness."

"Nobody was accusing you," Enfield said sharply. "But somewhere there's a leak."

Next night, John was in the group of five which Enfield informed of the big shipment from Skip Fraser's mine that was slated for the Benton coach next day. The others were Buchanan, a driver, a shotgun guard named Munn, Max Jobel, and Long-Lash Henry Travers.

"I've insured the shipment," Enfield said. "People are losing confidence in my coaches. After I've built a fair record, the regular insurance companies will take the risk, but as things stand now the profit, or loss, will be mine. Losing this ten thousand dollar shipment would ruin me. That's why it has to get through. People are used to seeing the big ones go out with Jobel or John riding shotgun. For that reason I'm sending Munn, and Buchanan will drive. I think you others have earned a day off. Enfield turned and left the office.

After leaving the stage office, Comanche John stopped for one drink at the Confederate States, then he clomped down the sidewalk to the Parson's. It was after midnight, and the old man was asleep. John simply walked through and out the rear door. Thus, reasonably sure that no one was following, he climbed along the mountainside coming to Jobel's cabin from the rear.

It was a dinky place of log, as much dugout as house. The reddish glow of a grease-dip showed through an oiled paper window. John hunkered in a clump of juniper, chawing tobacco, waiting. He had a hunch that Jobel was informing Mecklin, and, if so, Mecklin was liable to send a man up there.

After an hour the grease dip blinked out. John thought he'd gone to bed. He cursed a little and got up, shaking hitches from his knees. He crouched down quickly. The door had squeaked on its wooden hinges. Jobel stood just outside, listening.

Diamond Gulch was as quiet as it ever got. Wheelbarrows creaked as Chinese hauled gravel to the headbox of a sluice. Hurdy-gurdy music made a mixed-up, discordant sound desecrating the chill, pine-fragrant air.

Satisfied that no one was coming, Jobel hitched his twin pistols higher around his waist and walked down the path. John followed and saw him disappear through the rear door of the Territorial Hotel.

John entered half a minute later, finding a deserted hall lighted by a candle. At his left, rough-plank stairs led to the second floor. He could hear voices and the click of chips and traced the sounds to the front bar where the more affluent members of Diamond's society were drinking and bucking house games. Jobel was not there.

He retraced his steps. A Chinese lad in floppy sky-blue pants and shirt came downstairs carrying a tray.

"Field Mecklin's room," John said, tossing a small nugget in the tray.

"Seventeen!" cried the happy Chinese.

Seventeen was at the head of the stairs, door closed. He listened, hearing first Field Mecklin's voice, then Jobel's. He was unable to distinguish more than a word or two, but it made no difference. He was sure of Jobel.

Nights were not long in Montana Territory during the summer season, and dawn was already on its way. McCabe, Quinlan's replacement from Virginia City, was sitting guard at the stage office.

"Oh, you," he yawned, putting aside his gun. "You're lookin' for Enfield? He went some place. Last Chance, maybe."

John went outside. He sat in front, watching dawn grow up, silhouetting the jagged mountain horizon. It was less than an hour before the departure of the Benton coach with its ten-thousand-dollar load of gold. He wished he was certain what Mecklin would do . . .

John rose with sudden decision, strode to the Parson's, and through the back door with a blanket rolled under his arm. The Mexican hostler was asleep as usual, so John caught the pony. He rode, skirting the mountain, and cut back to town, reaching the Benton road where it made a short, steep pitch from the gulch bottom.

It was a spot few observers would consider a likely one for a hold-up, but after riding shotgun on the route, John knew what he was about. He worked rapidly, making slits through the blanket for head and wrists, slipping it on, tying a bandanna across his face. About his middle, and outside the blanket, he cinched his navy Colts. He looked squat and grotesque.

Innumerable trunks of slim lodgepole pine had been cleared and tossed in piles beside the road. He dragged one out, broke off its small branches, and laid it across the road, just above the crest of the steep rise. Then he waited, bandanna lifted, chawing tobacco.

VIII

THE SUN WAS RISING, sending hot beams over the slim evergreens. It was time for the coach. At last he heard it——a jingle of harness chains, crunch of steel-tired wheels. He lowered the bandanna and hid, squatting in rose briar, the butt of the lodge pole in one hand.

Hoofs made a clip-clopping right below. The horses slowed, having trouble with footing and heavy coach. He waited until the heads of the lead team appeared, then he rose, lifting the lodgepole trunk, propping it high on rose thorns.

From his downhill position the driver was unable immediately to see what was wrong. His team had merely stopped and swung to the right, wading up to their shoulders in brush.

"You dirty, putrefied Injun bait!" he was bellowing, rolling out his long whip.

John stood up, a navy in each hand. He was about level with the driver and guard in their high seat.

"Put on the brake," John said, disguising his voice.

The guard stared at him, jaw sagging, shotgun between his knees muzzle up. John's thumbs racked back the hammers. Their twin clicks cut the startled silence, sending the guard into action. He seized the handbrake, drawing it.

"Thar," said John. "Just keep your hands like that and you won't get in a bit of trouble. Now drop the shotgun overboard." He waited until it fell to the ground. "Give him the reins, driver."

The driver obeyed.

"Thar's a treasure chest in the for'ard boot. Toss her down."

The driver dragged out the heavy, metal box and dumped it overboard.

"You gents have been most cooperative," John said, dropping the lodgepole trunk. "Now get movin'. Fast. And don't stop too quick."

He watched the coach lunge up the grade and disappear behind galloping horses. Moving quickly, then, he tossed away his blanket, and carried the chest uphill where Patches waited.

He had originally intended merely to haul the treasure box back to the stage station, but its cumbersome weight made him change his mind. It would be easier to dump the bullion in a saddlebag.

He aimed at the lock, reconsidered. It would be too bad to ruin a box worth twenty to thirty dollars. He went to work with his sheath knife, finally succeeded in jimmying open the locks.

He lifted the cover. Gunnysack had been placed around the contents. He lifted the sack and stood back with a surprised movement. It contained bullet lead, tinned powder, and box after box of percussion caps. A bullet from his navy would have blasted him to kingdom-come.

He chuckled. Enfield was smart, all right. He'd handed out his secret to all those who had an opporunity of being

Mecklin spies, telling about the shipment of Benton gold, and he'd set this trap to blast the guilty one's head off.

Patches had his head up, jingling bit chains. John could hear nothing. The spruce and pine forest pressed closely around him, cutting off his view.

A twig snapped. He spun around, navy drawn. A voice cut the forest stillness.

"Surrounded, road-agent! If you'd rather have a bullet than a rope, just make your play."

There were other noises—the kind made by men moving through forest cover.

He opened his fingers, letting the navy fall.

"Now, that was sensible," the voice said. "Unbuckle the other one and save yourself from temptation." John did as he was told. "Now maybe you'd better get your hands up. You're a ring-tailed catamount once you get to warpathin', and I think we'll play her safe."

A huge, blunt-faced man came in sight, a long-barreled Texas derringer in each hand. They were smooth-bores, probably loaded with enough buck shot to stop a charge of cavalry. The man was Buffalo Browers, captain of the Diamond Gulch vigilance committee.

Other men followed him. Armed men with determined faces. One was tall, handsome Field Mecklin. There was an expression of smug satisfaction on the turned-down corners of his mouth.

A skinny little fellow with a rusty face and albino-pale eyes peered at John from a couple of angles and nodded importantly.

"That's him, all right. That's the old Comanche himself. I seen him at Horse prairie and I'd know him anywheres."

"Of course he's Comanche John," Mecklin said quietly.

"I'm John Jones, a Christian gentleman. Ask the Parson in at——"

"We should hang that fake preacher, too," Mecklin sneered.

"What am I accused of?" John demanded, turning to Browers.

Browers looked shocked, then decided to laugh. "What you accused of! Stand thar by that open treasure chest just took off a robbed coach and ask what's he accused of. Now that takes a cheek for you."

"This is Enfield property, ain't it?"

"Reckon it is."

"Then you better bring Jack Enfield around and as——"

"You danged idiot, who do you think told us the coach was goin' to get robbed? Who do you think sent us out here if not Jack Enfield?"

"Anyhow, I want a trial. It's every man's privilege to——"

"You've had your trial a couple of times already, I reckon, and now you're goin' to get the hangin' you was sentenced to." He looked around. "You brung us to a good spot, I'll say that for ye, John. Thar seems to be no special shortage of trees."

SOMEONE TOSSED out a coil of windlass rope. It struck the earth near John's boots, and for a few seconds the men stared at it. The albino picked it up and commenced wrapping a big, clumsy hangman's knot.

John chawed, took aim, and plastered a white quartz pebble with tobacco juice.

"All right. I'm Comanche John. I admit it. I know when I'm licked. We're down to the case cyards and you've coppered my last bet. Them as lives offen' stage coaches will die with a hemphalter around his windpipe, as the good book says. Reckon I was lucky that the viglantes in Bannack and Lewiston, and down in Californy weren't as sharp as this'n or I'd have been hung a good bit ago."

Buffalo Browers chuckled, enjoying the flattery.

"You're the cool one, sure enough," he chuckled.

"Yep I been havin' the time o' my life robbin' coaches lately. Two of 'em betwixt hyar and Last Chance. One on her way to Virginny City. Two of 'em betwixt Diamond and Benton. I sure got a stack o' dust hid away and I'm mournful not to get the chance of spendin' it." He singled out Wilks Iverson of the W & I Mercantile. "Too bad for you, too, Iverson, because a couple o' them gold pokes had your brand."

Iverson elbowed forward. He was

young with a pair of eyes that made him seem old.

"Where is it?"

"Ho! Ho!" roared Comanche John, stamping and beating the legs of his home-spun pants. "Wants to know whar I hid it. Hangin' me, and now he wants favors. Why would I be tellin' *you* whar I hid it?"

The albino runt had tossed the rope over a gnarled limb but Iverson held up one hand.

"Let's not be in too big a hurry here. Of course he's got gold from those coaches. He hasn't been gambling it away, so he still has it. All that gold." His eyes looked wistful.

Until that moment Field Mecklin had been keeping in the background. Now he strode forward. "He has a gang out here in the hills. He's only stalling to give them a chance to stage a rescue."

"We'll take care of the gang, if he has one, I reckon," said Buffalo Browers. "Nothin' I'd like more than to get a crack at eight or ten o' them dirty road agents. I only wish I had every road agent in the territory here. By hunkies, we'd put on a dance, and a damned light-footed one, too."

"Get the rope ready!" said Mecklin. His voice was not especially loud, but it had a saw-toothed edge of command. "Bring his pony over. We'll use it for the drop."

Men started obeying. Even lumbering, obstinate Browers.

But not Iverson . . .

Iverson was not large, but he was no coward. He faced Mecklin, "There's a lot more than principle involved in this as far as I'm concerned. There's some of my gold, and if there's a chance of getting it back, I want it."

"He's lying to you. He hasn't hidden any gold."

John guffawed. "How do you know, Mecklin?"

Mecklin's face had turned grayish beneath his tan. He knew everyone was looking at him. He had no answer for the obvious insinuation in John's question. He drew a single, deep breath, struggling to keep back his rage. Then without warning he set his heels and swung a right-hand blow to John's unprotected jaw.

John went down as though struck by a club. Mecklin would have leaped in and trampled his face as he had Jack Enfield, but Browers stopped him.

"Here now. I know how you feel about the varmint, but just the same that ain't the way a vigilance member should act."

John came to his knees, blood from mashed lips staining his whiskers.

"You're a brave man, Mecklin!" he said with mock admiration.

Iverson asked, "Where'd you hide that dust "

John considered while he stood up. He kept wiping blood with the back of his hand.

"Tell ye what—I'll make it a sportin' proposition, seein' I'm a gentleman o' the South whar such things are in considerable favor. I'll lead you to the gold on one provision—to wit, put me on Patches, my hoss, and give me a fifty yard runnin' start. Then if you catch me I'll get hung without complaint."

There was a mutter of objection. No one except Iverson and a couple more who were financial losers showed much enthusiasm.

"Get the horse over here!" Mecklin barked.

"What's wrong with giving him a dog's chance?" demanded Iverson. "*If* he can produce the gold."

The vigilantes seemed to be hanging in the balance.

"Make it a forty yard start," drawled John. "Or are you boys hyar in Diamond Gulch too yaller-gutted to make a gamble?"

"Ah, hell—gamble with him," said a miner. "He couldn't get away on that Injun cayuse."

"Where'd you hide it?" asked Browers.

"At that old White Gulch drift mine that Bogey opened when he was prospectin' out of Montana City three-four year ago."

"Why, that's seven mile."

"I wish I could move it closer for your convenience," mourned John, "but if you want your heavy color back, I guess we'll have to ride all seven miles of her."

IX

THE CAVALVADE skirted the town passing close to the big new houses of Iverson and Gerstenhover, and headed up the mountain on the old trail to White Gulch.

The placers of White Gulch were considerably older than those at Last Chance or Diamond, having been worked chiefly in the late fifties by miners from Gold Creek. Comanche John had not visited the gulch for two years, but he could see that the tunnels to Bogey's abandoned drift mine were still open.

Approaching closer, other things were visible—the ore chute coming steeply down the hill from an upper bench, the air shaft still farther, looking like a truncated chimney with the log cribbing built around it, the ore bin and the cabin with brush growing in front of its door.

He tried to remember the details of the mine's interior. The lower tunnel followed bedrock for about four hundred feet. Midway along it was a shaft through shale that explored a prehistoric gulch bed. A drift had been dug along this lower level connecting with the air shaft, where, if things worked out right, John might have a chance to escape.

In case of cave-ins, of course, he would be trapped, but then, he'd been trapped on yonder hillside, too.

The horses splashed across shallow White Creek, Iverson, John and Browers in the lead, the albino just behind with a sawed-off across the pommel, and the rest stringing out in twos and threes.

John drew up beside the ore bin. "Beggin' your permission, gents, can I get down?"

"Git, but don't try anything jumpy."

Iverson sat still a while, looking around and speaking in a dry, suspicious voice. "Seems that you traveled a long way to hide that stuff."

"Yep," John answered cheerfully, tying Patches.

They climbed the short slope to the tunnel.

They stopped at the portal.

"Candle?" asked Buffalo Browers.

John found one stuck in a niche of the wall, and Iverson lighted it with a patent sulphur match.

There was barely room for two abreast in the narrow tunnel.

"How far?" Iverson asked, going ahead with the candle.

"Far enough."

Iverson moved slowly, stepping over gravel and sand that had caved between the timbers of the walls. Behind him was Comanche John and Browers holding his arm, then the Albino with the sawed-off, and most of the others.

The tunnel made a bend. Light no longer reached them from outside. After thirty or forty steps the tunnel curved again. There would be a third curve, this one almost at right angles, and a few steps beyond that, the mouth of the shaft.

It was further than John expected. Iverson stopped just short of the last turn. He held his candle forward, letting its light fall on an undisturbed heap of sand and gravel that had sifted down covering a section of wooden track.

"When were you in here last?"

"Two-three days ago," chawed John. "Just after robbin' that last Chance stagecoach."

"Through *here?*" Iverson pointed at the undisturbed sand.

"Yep."

"I haven't seen a track."

"Of course not!" cried Mecklin, trying to crowd forward around men who almost filled the narrow passage. "He's never been here before. "Let's get out of this damned hole and do the job we started to do."

John said, "Iverson, you don't see a sign o' my boots because I didn't want ye should. Think I aimed to be tracked in here? If you'd like, I'll show ye the Injun system I use."

Nobody spoke for a second, so John crowded forward. For the moment Buffalo Browers was placed before the albino's sawed-off.

"Leggo my arm!" John said to Browers.

Browers released him, thought better of it, grabbed again.

"Stop that man!" screamed Mecklin.

Iverson had not expected him to be so close. He turned around, drawing the

navy he carried in the holster of his waist. The candle was close, and it was a simple matter for John to blow it out.

The blackness of the mine was sudden and complete—a blackness filled with shouting, stamping men.

BUFFALO BROWERS still held John's arm, but John was unexpectedly strong. He doubled over, spinning, whipping himself free.

He felt Iverson's gun ramming his belly. He seized the barrel, and twisted it down. The gun exploded, driving lead and burning powder to the floor. The close space was filled with strangling powder smoke. He ripped the gun, free, flung Iverson back along the tunnel. Someone grunted when he hit.

John backed away, one hand on the wall. He reached the bend and went on. Shouting voices rebounded, mingling in a nightmare babble.

A light came on, making a wavering, yellow reflection around the bend. Just ahead of him he could see some poles laid close together, forming a bridge over the shaft.

He pulled the poles apart, lowered himself. Below him, the shaft was a well of darkness. He swung free of the side—dropped. It was deeper than he expected. For a sickening moment he seemed to be falling through limitless space. Then he struck and fell back, up to ankles and one wrist in muck.

He stood and felt around for the drift. The voices were close above. Candle flame revealed a man's arm thrust down the shaft. Brightness of the light hid the face beyond.

"Can't see a damned thing," said Iverson's voice.

John moved out of sight along the mucky drift. It was poorly timbered. In some places, gravel had fallen, half filling it, but he could tell by the air that there was circulation, so the workings must still be open.

He reached the end of the drift, fumbled for the ladder. The ladder was a crude affair—pegs driven through single lengths of lodgepole. Far above was a tiny square of light.

He climbed slowly, making sure of each rickety rung. Two or three minutes passed. His nostrils caught a hint of pine fragrance from above. Voices came in a babble, apparently from many directions.

The candle came in view—a pinpoint of light ninety feet below. Its rays, quickly eaten up by the dark airshaft walls, did not reach him.

The shaft's mouth was only a dozen rungs above, but to reach it he would have to silhouette himself for a deadly three or four seconds.

He paused, clung with his legs, and heaved back and forth on one of the timbers, springing it loose. It started a shower of gravel. The timber fell, tearing splinters, starting a larger roar of gravel.

A gun exploded amid alarmed voices. John clambered the last rungs, seized the top of the cribbing, drew himself over the top. He was outside with the sun shining down and the broad, spottily timbered mountain before him.

Someone shot, and the bullet lifted a pebble that struck his homespun pants. Three or four men had been posted at the portal. He dodged to cover as a second bullet whipped past.

He could make a dash for it up the mountain, but afoot he would be run down in ten minutes. For the moment he was safe behind the shaft cribbing. He bellied across to the upper tunnel dump. Four men revealed themselves at brief intervals below, fanning out, trying to pin him down until the others got outside.

John skirted the dump, crouched for a moment behind the criss-cross timber supports of the ore chute. Below he could see the chute terminating in the partly filled bin.

A seedling pine grew at his feet. He tore it up by the roots. He swung over the edge of the ore chute, placing the pine beneath the seat of his pants. The chute was wood, polished by gravel until it had an oily brightness. With slippery long pine needles under him, he was on his way with a speed that blurred the mountain and sucked breath from his lungs. Guns were whanging on both sides, but he had no impression of bullets.

The ore bin was two thirds full of gravel. He hit it rolling. His head rammed the front, stunning him for an instant, but the logs gave a moment of protection.

He steadied himself, swung over the edge. Many shouting voices issued behind him, from the direction of the tunnel, but he could see no one. Patches was below. He dropped to the pony's back, jerked the hackamore free, headed downhill, through the creek with lead whipping hornet sounds from the air.

He swung from sight, following the old trail toward White City. The trail wound through heaps of washed gravel. It was a good trail—a trail that would take a man to Last Chance, or Eldorado, or a hundred other places, all of them distant from Diamond.

In the midst of thick timber he left the trail and swung back, up and over a rocky bank, through brush, up a slowly steepening mountainside. Running hoofs approached along the trail, and then grew distant. The last thing those vigilantes would expect was his return to Diamond.

"Yep," he grunted, at long last getting a chance to freshen his chaw of tobacco. "That just shows how damn little they know of the ways o' Comanche John!"

X

COMANCHE JOHN reached the divide and breathed his pony for a while, looking back across White Gulch. There was no sign of life in that direction. Ahead of him he could see the roofs of Diamond, their bleached shakes reflecting the bright, mid-morning sun.

The air of mountain summer was clear and dustless, rarified, undistorted by heat wave or humidity. He could see the town in minute detail, almost as though he were there, except that things were made small by distance.

A coach drawn by six horses was rolling down the road from town.

He cursed, and his sudden movement in the saddle made the Nez Perce pony start downhill at a stiff-legged canter. The coach was headed for Benton, and there'd be gold on it this time—that ten thousand dollar insured shipment, and Max Jobel would be riding shotgun.

"Yep, you're a smart lad, Jack Enfield," he said, letting the pony's motion bump words from his throat, "but you're tryin' mighty hard to out-figger yourself this time'."

The slope flattened out with the trail moving straight across a park where deer grazed. A girl, riding sidesaddle, galloped toward him on a big, chestnut horse.

It was Bess McGrail. The chestnut was unused to a woman's riding style, and kept turning around, tossing his head nervously as she reined him in,

"Thank the Lord it's you!" she said.

"You wanted me?"

"I saw them. Those—vigilantes. I thought they intended to hang you. I was riding to stop them. I found out from Mr. Gerstenhover——"

"I ain't got time now, little gal. There's a coach leavin' town that I think would be a prime idee to stop. She's got gold on her, and them drygulchers o' Mecklin's are probably fixin' to take it." He peered at her. "Maybe you don't believe that about your future husband?"

She simply stared at him.

He said, "You can't fool me, gal. You don't care a hoot for that brassy dandy. It's Jack Enfield you're fixin' to care about." Her eyes did not deny it. "You better wheel around and ride back with me. Get to Enfield as quick as you can. Tell him what Gerstenhover said—whatever it was. And tell him the chances are I'll need a little follow-up backin' on that coach, if he cares to take a ride."

It was a mile to town. He hit the gulch street traveling on a dead run. The pony was tiring. He drew up in front of the W & I Mercantile.

Three saddlehorses were tied to the rack. He chose a big-chested gray, jerked the reins free, mounted. A man ran out, cursing him, but John had already lashed the horse to a gallop and did not look back.

The gray was faster than he expected. He soon proved to have a heavy legged endurance, too.

For three miles the road wound along the bottoms, crossing and recrossing Diamond Creek. He caught sight of the

coach rolling ahead. Dust from its wheels settled in a silver film through bright sunshine.

Far back, from the direction of town, riders were coming. He could not tell who they were . . .

The road climbed a hillside making a series of looping turns. At one side was a saddle trail cutting steeply through timber. He saw the chance of intercepting the coach as it reached the crest.

Little of that steep trail was required to take the gallop out of the bay. But he went on bravely, faster than a man could climb.

The hilltop was covered with bare rock and stunted juniper. John swung down. He could hear the coach and horses. The lead team was just coming into view. Long-Lash and Jobel rocked in the high seat.

There were no passengers.

John paused on the edge of a dug-out bank, partly hidden by a juniper. Jobel saw him just as he leaped. A reflex brought the shotgun around. It boomed, sending shots so slose it nicked the sleeve of John's buckskin shirt.

The gunshot frightened the horses, and they were away at a gallop.

John caught the railing that circled the hurricane, hung with one hand the navy in the other.

JOBEL FLUNG himself back, one elbow resting on the jolting top, trying to get the shotgun barrel beyond Long-Lash for a second shot. The navy hammered, its heavy slug slamming Jobel backward.

Jobel made a last grab. He stood, shotgun gone and fingers tearing his chest. He fell backward with a lurch of the coach, struck ground and flopped over, lay huddled at the road's edge.

Long-Lash was trying to get at his gun.

"Don't do it!" barked John.

"Ye damned Yankee!" the driver shouted, naming John the lowest thing he could think of. "Ye damned Yankee spy."

"I ain't, and I ain't got time to explain. Your spy's back thar on the ground, and I can prove it."

"All right, you got the drop." Long-Lash was easing back on the ribbons, slowing his galloping team.

"Keep going!" John shouted.

His eyes had caught a single flash of gun shine. It was less than fifty yards ahead where the road curved around a dug-out bank. The road agent ambush. No time to turn back.

He jerked the whip from the driver's hand and laid it over the backs of the horses, setting them out on the dead run.

"What the devil——"

They swung at the curve. A log had been placed across the road. On each side crouched a masked man—one with a shotgun, the other with two navies.

"That answer your question?" bellowed John.

Even if they'd wanted, there'd have been no time to stop. The road agent on the right swung up his shotgun shouting something that could not be heard over the thunder of the rolling coach.

The navy pounded in John's hand, driving the man to earth. The other road-agent was diving for cover, seeing at the last terrified moment that he was being pinned between stagecoach and bank.

John was standing, bellowing, "Hunt your holes, ye belly-crawlin' blow-snakes, I'm a ring-tailed roarer, and I got a handful of sudden death!"

Miraculously, all six of the horses cleared the obstruction, but the coach's front wheels struck with ruinous force. One of them splintered, letting the coach bend sidewise over slivered spokes. The coach drove its side in the bank, hanging on one rear wheel, the front hub digging a deep furrow.

The six-horses dragged it on. It went over on its side and at last came to a grinding stop, obscured by a roll of dust.

The dust was lazy about settling. It parted slowly revealing Long-Lash face down, arms outflung. He might have been dead for all the movement he made.

John started to stand. He was hit by a bushwack bullet and turned half around. He went to his knees behind the coach.

He steadied himself, recovering from bullet shock. He still had the navy. He could hear the bushwhacker's jeering laugh—Blackie Andros.

Blackie thought the bullet had killed him, but he stayed down for a cautious moment. John edged the side of his face into view. He glimpsed Blackie among slide-rock above the bank. Blackie leaped back, firing. John's navy roared the same instant.

Blackie was hit. He still tried to crawl. He staggered to his feet, gun gone, arms clutching his chest. He turned slowly and fell face foremost, skidding and flopping loosely before coming to a stop on the steep hill.

John tore his buckskin shirt open for a look at his own wound. The bullet had struck ribs on the left side and glanced around. It was bleeding but not too badly.

A clatter of hoofs sounded, and a horse come to a sliding stop. Field Mecklin sat tall and erect on his winded bay horse, staring at the smashed coach. His eyes swung up the hillside. Apparently he couldn't figure it out.

"They're runnin', Mecklin,"

Comanche John was up and walking towards him along the rocky road, navy thrust in the band of his homespuns. Mecklin watched him, a light twitch of fear showing in his eyes.

He turned a little His left hand clutched bridle reins until their knuckles were bloodless. He kept wetting his dry lips.

John said, "Why don't ye run with your bushwaskers, Mecklin?"

"I don't run from swine!" he answered, trying to bring the old-time sneer to his lips.

Mecklin's pistol was out, but he had to level it over the horse's neck. The navy exploded, its bullet tearing the ivory-handled S & W from Mecklin's hand.

"Draw your other one," John drawled. "I'd like to fix ye up so's your Chinee servant would have to feed you until time for the hangin'."

But Mecklin didn't try for the other gun. The bullet had gone between gun and hand and then followed the bone to his elbow. He hung for a moment, weaving, clutching his forearm. Shock and pain made him lose equilibrium. He fell to the ground, remained, half sitting, one leg doubled under him.

Other riders approached. Jack Enfield, and behind him the shotgun guard from Virginia City, and next the girl.

"Gold's safe," John grunted. "I was only tryin' to save it from these lads this mornin' when I stopped that decoy coach. I don't know how the gal found out, but I suppose she told you."

"Yes, I know. Gerstenhover told her how things were. He's a good Dutchman." He talked, never taking his eyes from Mecklin. "Who was the spy—Jobel?"

"Jobel."

John climbed the hillside and caught the gray horse. Much as he liked Patches, the gray seemed to be a better traveler. Anyhow, there were certain vigilantes down Bannack way who were on the watch for that pinto horse.

"I got me some wages comin', I reckon. You can pay it to the kind owner o' this gray horse, and thank him for his thoughtfulness in leavin' him handy for me. The Parson will take Patches. If you'd like, you can toss my belts and navies on the Eldorado coach. Ask Buffalo Browers for 'em."

"You're not leaving——"

"Yep, son. I reckon it's for the best all around. I saved Mecklin for you, thinkin' maybe you'd like to have him testify to a few things before he got hung. That's a hangin' I'd like to attend, too, only I'm afraid Buffalo would see me and hanker to make it a double one."

John sat his horse a while, looking at the young man and the girl. A finer couple he'd never seen.

"Wish you'd take her hand in your'n," he said to Enfield.

"Like this?"

"Yep. I want my last look just like that. Now, thar's a picture for a man to take down the long trail with him!"

He nudged the gray and headed him up the mountain trail. He disappeared in timber, but his voice floated down, singing creakily in rhythm with the clip-clop of the horse's hoofs,

"Co-man-che John rode to Fino Gulch
With a wild and rowdy crew,
With his old pal Whisky Anderson
And that varmint, Henry Drew."

Wolves Of The Sundown Trail

By LES SAVAGE

DUNCAN INNES rose from the fire in a deliberate, unhurried way, picking up his Yerger rifle, and then he walked twenty feet into the trees. Here, in the black shadows outside the firelight, he dropped soundessly into the screen of antelope brush, and began loading his gun. He could not tell if he had actually heard sound out by the fire—after so many years in the wilderness, a man's sensitivities reached a more impalpable plane than that—he only knew that sense of a foreign presence had been brought to him.

His narrow, long face had the sharp, cutting thrust of a tomahawk, turning back and forth, first toward the Tetons, towering in bleak, lithic omniscence to the west of Jackson Hole, then in the direction of the Snake, where it flowed out of Jackson Lake. It had taken him two days to reach this camp from the place the mountain

Damned by a centuries-old curse, haunted by a blood-feud he didn't start, wilderness trapper Duncan Innes warned all who crossed his lonely trail: "Anybody who calls me friend signs his own death warrant."

men knew as Colter's Hell, and some heretics insisted on calling Yellowstone. His elkhides were pliable with wear and grease and dirt against his long, loose-jointed body. He was perfectly relaxed, though alert, holding the latent force of a watching cat. Finally there was the rustle of brush under the purple foliage of alders across the open space.

"Trapper?" called someone from over there. It held the hoarse, grunting bestiality of a bear. "I come peaceful. You out there somewhere?"

If you come peaceful, thought Innes, *why are you hiding?* After another long pause, the man must have realized his obligation, and appeared, a shadow at first, a bulky, square-set shadow that moved like a bear. He shuffled forward on padded feet until light fell across his black jack boots, his corduroy trousers, dark with grease, his coat made from the pelt of a cinnamon bear.

"Hell," he said, "you're suspicious as a coyote. I'm John Ryker and I come peaceful as a baby."

"Then tell your friends to show themselves," said Innes.

Ryker could not hide the way his mouth parted in surprise. He clamped it shut, as if trying to mask the reaction. Then he chuckled, throatily, "You got ears like some animal. Come on in, Wisapa."

The porcupine roach on the Indian's

head, and the black and white skunk fur ornamenting his neck marked him as a Dakota. A buffalo robe, worked with red and yellow quills, swirled at copper calves as he walked in and stood beside Ryker, holding a pair of saddle buckskins and a pack horse. His face was made up of bold, brutal planes, the flesh so swart it seemed almost negroid. Innes waited another space, listening, sniffing, turning his narrow head from side to side. Finally he rose and moved into the clearing, keeping his Yerger on them.

"What's your business?" he said.

"No special business," said Ryker, irritably. "Damn it, can't a man be sociable? I been up in the Wind Rivers all winter without seeing a white man. I heard there was a Scotchman trapping down this way. I come fifty miles just to smoke a pipe. Mountain men are usually a wary lot, but I never seen one suspicious as you."

"Maybe you're the one who should be suspicious," said the trapper. "You're John Ryker? I'm Douglas Innes."

Ryker's heavy beard was almost as cinnamon as his bearskin coat, but it did not quite cover the subtle alteration about his mouth. "Oh." He emitted the word in attenuated understanding. "Yes. I heard of you over in the Owl Creeks. The original hard luck kid. I even saw the body of your last partner. Something like that's supposed to happen to everybody connected with you. Is that the story? If lightning don't strike them, they get smothered in a snowslide." The hearty, throaty chuckle bubbled out of him again. "Well," he said, patronizingly, "suppose I ain't superstitious?"

Innes shrugged. "Suit yourself. I've tried warning people all my life. I'm tired of it. I killed a buffalo yesterday. I've got some doupille left if you want some of that."

"That's better," grinned Ryder. "We'll supply the potables. Wisapa, get that Monangahala from our possibles."

The Indian fumbled through the Mexican aparejos they were using for pack saddles, bringing forth a couple of the flat, wooden kegs of whiskey the traders brought up from St. Louis every year. Innes squatted down, began to spit the backfat.

Shifting firelight seemed to constantly change the gaunt, dour planes of his face. His long thin lips were clamped tight as a jumptrap. Sandy hair fell to his shoulders, filled with dark streaks from wiping greasy fingers in it for years. Ryker threw aside his bearskin to hunker by the fire, warming his belly. He wore a red wool shirt underneath, and Innes caught the glint of firelight on the brass butt cap of an immense Ketland-McCormick, thrust naked through the man's belt. Something sly in the man's glittering little eyes kept Innes taut, close to his rifle.

When Ryker passed the Monangahala, Innes meant only to wet his tongue with it. But the only liquor he'd had for years was the acrid Indian tiswin, and he could not help drawing deep once he had the keg to his lips.

"There's supposed to be more to that bad luck of yours," said Ryker. "A curse on your clan or something. I never did get the gist of it."

INNES FOUND his painful reticence thawed by the fiery fumes of the Monangahala. "The Innes clan goes way back. I'm the namesake of Sir Duncan Innes, who fought beside The Bruce, back in Scotland. Alister Mor was one of those who opposed Bruce. In 1284, Bruce captured him and shut him up in Dundonald Castle on the Clyde. Duncan Innes was put to guarding him. Alister pleaded with Sir Duncan to release him before he died of fever he'd contracted in the battle, but Duncan refused. On his death bed, Alister pronounced a curse on Duncan, promising nothing but tragedy and death to any by the name of Innes, or any who should have association with them, until the Clan Innes was exterminated——"

He stopped, realizing the release he had allowed himself, and the firelight seemed to change his eyes from a deep-pooled blue, to a sudden opacity that glittered like the reflection of sun on ice. Ryker grinned, handing him the whiskey again.

"Now, don't start getting touchy just because you've opened up to a stranger. A man needs to talk once in a while. That's

probably your trouble. Surely there's no harm in telling someone this tales."

Innes shrugged, taking the keg. What was the difference? The man was right. He lifted the whiskey for a toast.

"Thumping luck and fat weans," he said, and choked on the burning liquid.

Ryker sent Wisapa an oblique glance. "So the curse came true?"

Innes nodded. "A bitter feud naturally arose between the Innes and the MacAlisters," he explained. "Sir Duncan's son was killed on his wedding night by a group of MacAlisters. Sir Duncan's wife was carried off by a Viking sea raider. They both drowned in the North Sea. Sir Duncan's daughter had an idiot for her first baby. I could keep on going all night. Five hundred years of it, and not one Innes has escaped. After the Disarming Act in Scotland, a lot of Innes and MacAlisters sailed to America, along with thousands of others. My grandfather settled in Virginia. A tory named George MacAlister led a bunch of Hessians to my grandfather's plantation and they burned it to the ground. Grandfather killed George with this very Yerger I'm carrying, and had to flee to Kentucky to escape his kinsmen. My father was born there and grew up to be a drunkard. He murdered my mother in a fit when I was sixteen. Grandfather killed him for it and in turn was hanged for murder."

"Lord," said Ryker, huskily. "That's quite a story."

"You don't believe it?" asked Innes hotly.

"I didn't say that," snorted Ryker. "Won't you let me express a little amazement? I've lived among the Indians too long to doubt anything like that. You'd be surprised at the crazy things I've seen. I'm as superstitious as they are, I guess."

"You speak awfully smooth for having been out here that long," said Innes, squinting at him suspiciously.

Ryker shrugged. "I come from college people. I'm not ashamed of my education. I even got Wisapa talking English as good as that of most white men on the frontier." He paused, studying Innes. "If that feud is still on, you'd better not go around Hoback Canyon. A man named Roderick MacAlister runs a trading post there."

"I heard of him," said Innes. "The son of George MacAlister was hunting my family in Kentucky. That's why I headed west, after Grandpa was hanged. I can't see any sense in going on with this feud. I don't know whether Roderick MacAlister followed me or just drifted out this way. More than one of them did that. There's another MacAlister working for HBC over on the Missouri."

"Suppose you found a man willing to be your partner, Innes?"

"He'd be a fool," said Innes. "If you saw the body of my last partner, it must have been in a tree. I left him with the Shoshones and that's the way they bury their own. His name was John Donn, and he was drowned in the spring breakup on the Wind. Another man threw in with me last summer and the Crows got his scalp two weeks later. It happens to anybody connected with me."

"Knowing all that, suppose a man still wanted to throw in," said Ryker. "Those Shoshones in the Wind Rivers told me you'd left for Colter's Hell. But I ran into a bunch of Wisapa's people over in the Big Horns who told me you'd been there, too, hunting for Lost River."

"Wasn't me," said Innes.

"Don't be like that," said Ryker. "They even told me that toast you made when you drank their tiswin: 'Thumping luck and fat weans.' A big Scotsman with a piece of parchment hunting for Lost River."

"I told you it wasn't me," said Innes. "I haven't seen the Big Horns since '31."

Ryker leaned forward, his voice taking on a sarcasm. "Surely you've heard the Lost River story."

"Something about a Franciscan priest in the seventeen hundreds, wasn't it?" said Innes.

Ryker's voice thickened with that sarcasm. "Fray Escobar. 1750. He was an expert cartographer, and kept an extensive journal on all his trips. These journals are preserved in documents of the Catholic Church in Madrid and Mexico City. There's a legend that he got as far north as Colter's Hell, but historians don't hold with it, because there's no journals or

maps to prove it. On all his travels, a Negro servant named Juanito accompanied him."

Innes could not help glance at the dark Indian. The man nodded. His voice startled Innes, and the fluency of his English.

"Wisapa means Black Son in the language of the Dakotas. It is a story of my tribe that a white medicine man came into the Powder River country with a black servant many generations ago. When he left, and unmarried squaw had a child who was almost black. This child was my great grandfather."

Ryker pulled a small, leather-bound book from his coat, handing it to Innes. The paper was brittle, yellow parchment, with faded, partly obliterated writing in old Spanish upon it.

"Black blood wasn't the only thing Escobar and his servants left with the Dakotas," said Ryker. "He must have lost his journal there, too. It was one of Wisaba's fetishes, when I first met him, handed down through his family as good medicine. Turn to page fifty-three, about the tenth line. You can the date out Rio Perdido. It's under the date of March tenth. Escobar says he's come upon the headwaters of a sizable river which was unknown even to the Indian guides, in a valley so close to being inaccessible that he stumbled into it by the merest chance. In one hour, sitting at breakfast, he counted ninety-eight *castores* —that's beaver, in Spanish—at a single pool alone."

STARING at the faded book, Innes could not deny the tug of excitement such a bizarre tale brought. "That's a dream. There aren't that many beavers left in all the mountains west of the Missouri. It's getting trapped out, Ryker, and you know it."

"But this river hasn't been found," said Ryker. "Trappers have been hunting it for years. With Wisapa's help, I've tried to find it. But the landmarks Escobar mentions aren't clear enough. The Indians had different names than he gave them, and a lot of them have probably changed since then anyway. Escobar drew maps for every other trip he made. He must have drawn one for this. Ninety-eight beaver in one hour at one spot, Innes. Think how that place must be crawling with plews. A man could get rich in one season."

"If you're still thinking of me," said Innes, "I told you I don't have any map."

"Ryker's thick, hairy neck grew red, but he kept his voice low. You'll never git it with the map alone, Innes. Together, we could find it."

"I told you I don't have any map, damn it."

"Yes you do," said Ryker. "Give it to me."

Innes did not realize how much the whiskey had affected him until he tried to focus his eyes on what Ryker held in his hand. An iron pan resolved itself. A flat lock plate. A goose-necked hammer. A Ketland-McCormick.

"I tried to do it the friendly way, you'll have to admit that," said Ryker. He jerked the pistol. "Search him, Black Son."

The Indian threw off the robe, revealing the fancy buckskin covering his body, and rose softly to move toward Innes. Innes made a forward shift, as if to rise, but a wave of that pistol held him. Its threat was clearing his head some now. He could hear his own breathing. Damn fool, to trust anyone a minute. The Indian stooped to pull off his slippover elkhide shirt. Innes reached up and grasped a wrist, lunging to one side with the grip. It carried the fall-to pull off his slipover elkhide shirt. Innes heard the click of that goose-necked hammer, cocking under Ryker's thumb, but the man would have shot Wisapa.

Innes tried to throw himself with the falling Indian, keeping the man between himself and Ryker, but Wisapa twisted in his plunge, and Ryker was leaping to his feet, reversing the pistol. Innes whirled toward him ,trying to rise. Wisapa's hand hooked in his elbow, pulling him off-balance. Ryker slugged with the clubbed gun.

It struck Innes in the face and he fell backward with pain blotting out all perception. He felt the blow of a gun once more and knew he was lying on his back because there was pressure there. He heard

Ryker snarl something, and felt hands passing over his body. His moccasins were ripped off, his shirt, his pants.

"It's not on him," said Ryker. "Look in the pack saddles."

STUNNED BY THE BLOW, Innes knew he could not hope to fight them. If they went this far for the thing, wouldn't they just as soon kill him? He had been a fool once tonight. No use laying himself open again by stupid heroics. Ryker had picked up his rifle in one hand and stuffed the pistol back in his belt. They were both going through his pack saddles now. Innes' feet were near enough to the fire. Summoning all his concentration in a painful effort to overcome the daze of pain, he squirmed till his feet were right in the fire, and then swept them toward the horses. A shower of blazing sparks and popping brands flew at the animals. They reared, screaming wildly. The Indian pinto charged right into the men over the pack saddles. Innes stumbled to his feet, plunged for the trees. He heard Ryker shout something behind. He was in darkness when the shot came. The lead slug rattled through the purple flowers in the alders above his head.

He was dizzy and weak and he reeled through choke-cherry, ripping his bare legs, crashed into a cottonwood, gagged in the resinous scent of poplar. Somewhere ahead he could hear the rush of the river. He was going downslope. He could hear them behind, gaining on him. He fell in dark, loamy earth, rose to run again, swaying, stumbling, trying to shake the pain and giddiness out of his head. There was the flash of white water in darkness ahead. His feet sank in saffron sand. He knew he could not run much farther.

Spring floods were carrying all kinds of debris down the swollen river. Buckbrush floated past, soggy and matted. An uprooted aspen, still bearing clouds of yellow foliage, came into his vision. He waded out and caught at it.

Swirling water pulled him down. The sucking force of the tree caught his arms. He sank down into the sweet-smelling leaves, gasping painfully, and felt the tree gather speed. Deep water clutched at it, and for a moment he thought it would roll him off. But the foliage gave the trunk the stability of outriggers, and he was still solidly aboard as he passed out, that one last thought forming dimly in his mind, before all thought fled: *Thumping luck and weans, hell!*

II

THE GIRL had immense, dark eyes, and the whitest skin Duncan Innes had ever seen. Her hair was blue-black as a Hawkins barrel, caught up in laughing, tufted, windblown curls all over her head, making a wild, dancing frame for her strange little elfin face. Her mouth kept curling up at one corner in a smile half compassionate, half mocking, as she bent over him. He tried to rise, but she pushed him back down.

"You'd better lie still for a while," she said. "I'm Nairn. My billie found you floating by our house on a tree yesterday afternoon. You're pretty sick."

"Your billie?" he muttered.

"My brother," she laughed. It was like tinkling glass. "Brahan."

"Nairn? Brahan?" Innes did not speak the names very loud, because something was beginning to work in his consciousness, something dark and foreboding. He tried to find its logic. It was the Snake he had thrown himself in.' Could he have been carried as far south as Hoback Canyon by that tree? Something inside him started crawling.

"I'm Brahan," smiled a curly, black-haired young giant beside Nairn. "And this is Elgin, my older brother. And Roderick, my father.

"Roderick MacAlister?" asked Innes, in a cold, dead voice.

Brahan's father must have been in his middle fifties. He was the biggest man in the room. Both Brahan and Elgin were over six feet, but Roderick topped them by the full length of his massive head. The deep, weathered lines of his open face were as stonelike, as uncompromising as the granite crags of the Tetons. His eyes were so blue they looked black, and he wore his mane of white hair down to his

shoulders. His laughter at Innes' question shook the room.

"Aye, Lalland, how did ye ken a bouk like me was a Vic-Ian-Dhu?"

"You'll have to forgive father," chuckled Nairn. "He's been here forty years but he still talks like he came right up out of Loch Shin. He called you a Lowlander and he asked how a man like you knew he was—"

"I understood him," said Innes thinly. He was staring at the tartan Roderick wore, the hated colors of the MacAlisters. He could hear his grandfather cursing its red and green sett now, he could hear the Gaelic invective heaped upon its coat of arms by his father in a drunken rage.

"What's your name, trapper " asked Elgin.

Innes got up before speaking, because he knew what would come when he told them, and something in his face kept Nairn from trying to push him back down. He saw that they were in a bunkroom at the rear of a log building, its walls hung with the stuffed heads of bears, a huge moose thrusting its mossy antlers from the rear, the puncheon floor covered with bearskins and buffalo robes. He himself was hung with a red Hudson Bay four point, warm and wooly against his bare hide. A silence had fallen in the room as they watched him. For a moment he thought of giving them a false name. The negation of that went through him so violently he shook his head with it. Despite the resignation the tragedies of his life had molded into him, some fierce pride of those ancient Celtic Highlanders still flamed deep within him.

"I'm Duncan Innes," he said.

There was a moment when all the sound in the world seemed to have stopped. Even his own breathing. He could see the diffused blood sweep into Roderick's face until the flesh looked crimson. A great pulse started a tom-tom beat across the man's temple. Innes grew taut, waiting for that roar of ancient Celtic rage to fill the room. It did not come. Roderick turned without a word and moved toward the door.

"Father," said Nairn. "Where are you going?"

"To git my claymore." Roderick could hardly force the words from his mouth. "An Innes should be killed with nothing else."

"No, Father——" the girl jumped after him, catchin an arm—"You wouldn't, you can't, he's sick. Can't you see, a MacAlister would have more honor than that?"

"I have my honor." The shout was coming now, as deafening as the ice breaking up on Ben Nevis. "I won't allow an Innes in my house."

"No, father——"

"Aye, aye," bellowed the man, swinging her off his arm so that she fell against the wall. "I'm Ard-Righ here. I'm high chief, do ye question my dictates?"

"Nairn's right, dad," called Brahan, going after him. "You can't do it to a sick man. Can't you forget this feud? We're in a new country now. We have no right to carry it on. This Innes never did us any harm."

"His grandfather killed my father in Virginia," bellowed the man. My own father died hunting them down. I'll do the same before I let one stinkin' crawlin' ferlie of them remain alive."

HE WAS in the other room now, the stamp of his feet shaking the floor, and Nairn and Brahan had followed him out. Innes could hear them pleading with the old man. He stood shakily, holding the blanket up about him, gripping the pine bunkpost with the other hand, searching the room for some weapon. Elgin MacAlister stood near the rear wall, watching Innes closely.

He was a man about thirty, taller than Innes, with some of his father's massive size in his great neck, like a branze tree trunk set on his shoulder, and the immense bony structure of his thick-thewed wrists and great knobby hands. But the ceaseless animal movement of woods running or trapping seemed to have melted off all superfluous weight, until his frame bore the gaunt, drawn refinement of a timber wolf. His face, too, did not bear the full stamp of Roderick's stubborn, unbending integrity. It was more narrow through the jaw and brow, something almost sardonic in the tilt of his black brows.

"Never mind looking for a weapon," he

said. "Nairn will argue him out of it. She's the only one who can handle dad. It's unfortunate, in a way. I think you should be killed."

Innes looked sharply at him. "Isn't that unreasonable? Just because I'm an Innes. I never saw you before. I never did you any personal harm and you never did me any, and if we met under other circumstances, there would be no cause for a quarrel."

"But these aren't other circumstances," said Elgin. "To a true Scot, the honor of his clan is as sacred as his personal honor. Every name in the clan is as precious to him as his own name. It doesn't matter that Sir Duncan Innes killed Alister Mor over five hundred years ago. I could feel no more cause for vengeance if it had been you killing my brother yesterday. If you don't see it that way you aren't worthy of being called a Scotsman."

"Oh, now, Elgin," pouted Nairn, coming into the room, with a tray of food. "Here we've just got father quieted and you start. Can't we have peace? I've brought Innes some food. Let's toast to a new day in the history of our clans, a day of friendship and goodwill. Here's health to the sick, stilts to the lame, claise to the back, and brose to the wame."

The brose was potage made by pouring boiling water over oatmeal which was stirred while the water was poured, and the wame was the belly which Innes soon filled. With the oatmeal were square cakes Innes had heard his grandfather call bannocks, and a broth Nairn said was broo. Brahan came into the room while Innes was eating. He bore the candid, open honesty of his father in his red-cheeked face, with none of the older man's stubbornness. Like a big, clumsy puppy in his movements, he seated himself casually on the floor beside the bunk.

"Father's cooled off now, I guess," he said. "Tell us how you happened to be floating down the Snake in such naked state with big weals on the back of your head, Innes. Did somebody rob you?"

"Just as well," said Innes, somberly. "A man named Ryker was trying to get a map from me that I never had. He said a Scotsman had been up in the Big Horns with an old Spanish map, hunting for Lost River."

Brahan looked in a surprised way at his sister. Then he reached inside his red wool shirt to pull forth a roll of buckskin. When he had opened it, there was a dirty, faded piece of parchment.

"That was me, last spring," he said. "I saved the life of a Franciscan father down near Santa Fe two years ago. He gave me this. I told him I didn't want pay for such an act but he forced it on me. Said it had been in possession of the chapel at Chimayo for a hundred years. It would do a fur man more good than a priest. Dad didn't take any stock in it. But I was trapping north last spring, and I turned aside for a couple of months."

"Did you find Lost River?" said Innes.

"No," frowned Brahan, "But I found plenty of evidence and stories among the Indians up there to prove this isn't too far off the track."

"And you're a damn fool for showing anything like that to an Innes," said Elgin. They all turned to him, and an empty, uncomfortable silence filled the room. "What's the matter?" he asked mockingly. "Am I not even welcome among my own kin. Time was when an Innes would never have crossed our threshold. Now one comes in and takes my place——"

"Oh, don't be bleth'rin like that, Elgin," sighed Nairn. "Can't we treat him like a human being? Can't you forget all that?"

"No," said Elgin, looking at Innes. "Never."

THE DAYS PASSED TOO swiftly for Innes after that. Because of Nairn. She brought him all his meals and sat often late into the evening, talking with him, sometimes in the buckskin skirt of the trading post, sometimes dressing up for him in the plaid and arisaid of her clan. She took up one of Brahan's shirts for him, and found a pair of elkhide leggins with all the fringe cut off by some trapper for whangs. She talked brightly the first day or two, keeping him amused with her news of the spring rendezvous on the Green, which Brahan and Elgin had left to attend, with light chatter about her own history, her childhood, her trip west

with her father, the founding of the Hoback post.

But he sensed a definite attempt to keep it impersonal, a maternal desire, perhaps, to shield him from anything somber of depressing during his convalescence. It was ironic, in a way, for that would indicate that she felt any discussion of his own past could be nothing but somber. Fnally, however, on the third evening, she could not control her natural curiosity. She sat beside his bunk in the silence that had fallen, and he could feel her eyes on him. He lay on top of the blankets, arms behind his head, listening idly to the sounds Roderick made in the front room.

"You're a strange, morose sort of man," she observed, finally. "More like the old Highlanders than most third generation Scots. Yet you don't even speak like a Scotsman. What makes you this way?"

"Maybe I'm naturally that way," he murmured.

"I can't believe it," she said. "Not to such a degree. Only an animal that has been hunted and hounded and cheated and hurt all its life is suspicious and secretive. You remind me of that, a lot. Is it the curse? Has it followed you that closely?"

He looked darkly at her. "Most men would ridicule it."

"I'm a Scot, Innes," she said. "And a MacAlister. I've heard of it all my life. I've seen it work. My father showed me the ruins of your grandfather's plantation when we were passing through Virginia. I was ten when we heard a man named Innes had murdered his wife in a drunken rage in Kentucky. I was with father when he traveled there, seeking your people out of vengeance for George MacAlister."

She caught at his arm, bending toward him. "It can't go on like that forever, Duncan. It's got to stop somewhere. Maybe this is the place. The first time an Innes has been in the house of a MacAlister for over five hundred years. You don't know how hard it was to win father over. I didn't realize I had that much influence on him. But it's happening, Innes. Let me help you."

He turned partway on his side to find that she had ben toward him so closely that his own movement brought their faces to wthin an inch of each other. The smell of her was too much like heather, the look of her too beautiful. He realized how long it was since he had been this close to a woman. A man got lonely, and the craving took on an intensity that was painful sometimes. A tremor ran through his body, and he found it hard to get the word out.

"Why . . . Nairn?"

"Why?" She shook her head from side to side, lips still parted with the word, as if trying to find the answer herself. Her breath warmed his face, full of a faint, seductive scent. Almost as if it were not his own volition, his arm went about her, and he rolled over until the upper part of his body was against her, his legs slipping off on the floor to give him leverage, bending her backward in a kiss. She took it with no resistance, a growing eagerness in the way her lips ripened against his. When he finally took his mouth away, they were both breathing heavily. She stared up into his eyes for a long time without speaking. Finally it came, in a husky murmur.

"Now, do you have to have a reason why I should want to help you, Innes?"

He turned violently toward the wall. "Go away, Nairn. Before it's too late. Nobody's ever been associated with me who didn't suffer for it. I couldn't do that to you."

"Maybe it's already too late, Innes."

"It can't be," he said viciously. "Forget what happened. It could happen to any man and woman. Just a kiss."

"It's more than that to me, Innes. The kiss is just the proof of it."

"No," he said, in a tortured, almost incoherent way. "Not with me. I've kissed a lot of girls. Never meant anything." He turned his head away.

"Then why does it bother you so?" she said.

"It doesn't," he said. He wouldn't face her. "Go away, will you, Nairn. Leave me alone. Please."

She left him, finally, there in the darkened room, and it was the first time he had wanted to cry since he was a kid. He had never craved anything so badly—and

had never seen so little hope of attaining it.

He tried to avoid her next morning by getting outside. But she found him down by the creek. The wide, frank depth of her eyes on him was a challenge. He tried to avoid it, skipping rocks, hunting for beaver sign, pointing out the tracks of a pronghorn to her. But all the time, her eyes were on him that way, and he could read the feeling in her easily enough, becaus the same thing was in him. The men felt it that night, at supper and it was a strained half hour, with Roderick leaving the table in a surly mood. Innes retired early to escape her, but could not sleep. The next morning he told her he had to leave.

"Why?" she said, in a small, hollow voice.

"If I stay much longer, I won't be able to leave. I couldn't do that to you."

"You're talking about your feelings for me now."

Her voice was stronger now.

"No——"

"Yes. Why don't you say it out, then, instead of beating around the bush? I'll say it if you won't, Innes. I love you."

THE SHOCK OF IT stopped him for a moment, and then his voice left him in a guttural, strangled sob. "No, Nairn, you can't let yourself——"

"I can't help myself."

"It's just being around so close to me. A stranger. Something new. You don't get many men here. Just your brothers. When I'm gone, you'll see."

"I should be insulted," she said. "You don't know how many men have courted me, Innes. One came three hundred miles. I've known enough men. I never felt anything for the others. I do for you. I told you. Do you love me?"

The quiet, candid depth of her gaze went clear down to the bottom of him, and he thrust his head from side to side in a tortured way. "No. Nairn, I can't let myself——"

"It's time you stopped running from that curse," she said. "You've been running from it all your life. You ran from Kentucky when your mother was killed. You haven't stopped anywhere along the line to fight it."

"But I have, I have, you don't know how many times——"

"Then stop again. We're already fighting it, Innes. You're living the house of a MacAlister . . ."

"With Elgin waiting to kill me and your father hoping for one false move?" he said bitterly.

"Are you afraid of them?"

"No," he muttered.

"Are you afraid of me?"

"No."

"Do you love me?"

He stared at her, the contortion of his face twisting all its flat, hard planes out of shape. He couldn't tell her, he couldn't suck her in like that, draw her down, lay her open to what so many others had suffered. The conditioning of a lifetime blocked him off from it. He drew in a warped, rended breath. Then, slowly, he forced a grin onto his face, emitted a harsh, cynical chuckle.

"Don't be a fule, kid," he said, mocking her with the Scotch word. "Sure I'm thinking of the curse. I'm trouble and you can't get out of it. But not because I love you. I'm fond of you. I'm grateful to you for what you've done. And for that very reason I'm leaving. I'd do the same for a dog. I'd kick him away from my campfire for fear a bolt of lightning would strike him there or a MacAlister would shoot him for being with me." He saw the stricken look fill her eyes and squinted them, as if with the shock of pain. He turned swiftly away, unable to bear it, and walked stiffly to the door. The front chamber comprised the store of the trading post, with a long plank set on barrels sufficing for the counter. It was filled with scents of acrid black powder and sour leather and stored pelt. Roderick was standing behind this plank, and he must have heard them, for he put his two massive hands on the board, and it groaned as he leaned his weight forward onto them.

"So you're leaving," he said. "Good riddance to the devil, I say. You're going that way, with not another thing from me."

"Dad," said Brahan, from the doorway,

"at least give him a coat and some food."

"Shut your trap, you crawlin' ferlie," shouted Roderick. He beat one hand on the plank, causing it to clap sharply against the barrels at either end. "I'd rather he left feet first, but I gie me word to Nairn. Just remember that, ye ree, chuffle-mouthed, brak of an Innes. Gin ye leave that door, the promise is over, gin you ever show up again, I'll take me claymore to ye!"

"Guid swats," murmured Elgin. He sat in dark corner peeling an apple, and Innes had the feel of the man's sardonic eyes on him all the way out. Brahan followed, slipping out of his heavy coat of Scotch plaid.

"Here. It's spring but you'll need it. I've got a rifle and some shot if you'll wait a minute."

Innes started to protest, but the young man was already in his clumsy, puppyish run toward on outbuilding where he slept, returning with an old Jake Hawkins and a shot pouch and buffalo horn.

"I'll pay you back somehow," Innes told him.

"Don't insult me," said Brahan, laughing, clapping him on the back. "We're brother Scots, aren't we?"

That warmed Innes unaccountably, and he felt himself turn his face away in a paradoxical, typically masculine gesture of embarrassment in the face of sentiment. *How strange a man got when he stayed apart from his fellows,* thought Innes. Here, the most he wanted to do was thank Brahan, and yet he could find no words to do it with, he could only find an embarrassment so deep it blocked up his throat. Brahan put a hand on his shoulder and told Innes he would accompany him to the mouth of the canyon. They set out toward the trail along the river bottom. Before plunging into the thick willows, Innes glanced back once. Nairn stood in the doorway. Her face looked small at this distance, doll-like, a cameo of lost, hopeless pain that twisted his insides up till he thought it was cramp.

Spring was ripe in the land now. Scarlet cones covered the upper tips of the spruce, and they stood like flaming pyres against the darker green of pine and fir. The aspen crowded the sandy banks of the Hoback River with fluttering jade and the red-blossomed balsom poplar filled the air with its honeyed scent. The rusty coat and double-prong antlers of a mule deer flashed through the willows, and great soft eyes peered at the two men for a moment. Finally they reached the columnar ochre cliffs forming the canyon mouth.

"You want to keep an eye out for Ryker," Brahan told Innes. "I was down to Bridger's fort while you were sick. He was there with that Dakota of his. I even had a few words with him."

"You didn't have a fight?"

"No," said Brahan. "But I told him he picked the wrong Scotsman when he thought you had the map. The next time he wants a look at it he'd better hunt the MacAlisters up."

"You fool," said Innes. Then he quieted, staring narrow-eyed at the man. Finally he brought himself to speak. "You did that . . . for me."

Innes saw the same embarrassment in the boy which he had felt earlier. Brahan shrugged, grinning self- consciously. "You won't be bothered any more."

"But you." said Innes,' you've laid yourself wide open. He might try it again.—"

"We have a saying in our house," Brahan told him. "It's ill getting the breeks of a Highlandman. In this case, Ryker will have to get the britches off three Highlandmen. Dad and Elgin and I may have differed over what to do with you, but when it comes to a fight, we stand as true as a Loch Liel oak."

INNES STARTED to say something, broke off. Brahan must have sensed his inhibition; the youth thrust out a hand, and Innes took it gratefully, feeling in the firm, strong grip all he could not express vocally, knowing Brahan understood, now. made his way over the pale buffalo grass

Without speaking again, he turned and to the sparkling confluence of the Hoback and the Snake. He ducked into timber, hunting a ford, and was deep down an avenue of spruce when he heard the sharp report. He halted, thinking it might have been ice breaking up on the heights. But that did not suffice, somehow. In a dark,

Celtic premonition, he turned back. He was running by the time he reached the edge of timber, turning up a slope that brought him out on a bluff above the spot where he and Brahan had halted.

The men must have been a quarter mile on up the canyon. Two of them were dragging Brahan's body from an open glade into timber. A cinnamon bearskin caught the sunlight in ruddy tints. There was no thought in Innes' mind at that moment. He was flooded with a terrible blinding anger that clogged his throat up with hot blood, and started the pulses across his temples to pounding like drums. He threw himself down the bluff, sliding through shale and chocolate earth, landing heavily on the slope below. Then he began to run, loading his rifle as he went, in a thoughtless, mechanical way. He was sucking in great, painful breaths from the long, punishing, uphill sprint when Ryker's head turned. They had dragged Brahan within a few feet of the willows. Ryker dropped the slack body and wheeled. Apparently he had not stopped to reload after shooting Brahan, for he plunged into the trees without trying to fire.

Innes took a snap shot at the disappearing bearskin coat. Wisapa followed Ryker, and the two of them were gone. No woodman in his right sense would have run after them crashing through the under brush like that, but the rage was still so roaring in Innes that he had no caution. He ran for a hundred yards without even trying to cut sign, and found himself at the river. Then, gasping painfully for air, vision swimming with exhaustion, he realized he had about played out his string.

They were nowhere in sight. He backtracked, trying to pick up their sign, but his own passage had obliterated whatever tracks they had left. It would have taken him an hour to unravel their sign from his for any distance. He finally went back to Brahan, sobbing with the terrible frustration of his defeat, hands working on the rifle with the awesome rage filling him.

The boy had been shot through the back, and was dead. His shirt and pants had been gone through, and Innes knew why. A few feet into the open, he saw the large sheet of tanned buckskin the boy had wrapped the map in. Then the steady plod of running feet wheeled him, driving onto his feet. Elgin and Roderick appeared on the river trail, coming at a steady dog trot that any woodsman worthy of the name could keep at for hours. Innes' figure standing up beyond the band of willows must have caught Elgin's eye, for he turned, and then plunged toward Innes. He halted when he was near enough to see Brahan, on the ground. Roderick came up, staring at his son.

Then, in ominous silence, the two men began moving forward again. The red fireweed swished at Elgin's buckskin leggins. The blue asters whispered around Roderick's laced boots. The river made chuckling little murmurs in the distance. Innes watched them in a strange, petrified tension, unwilling to think, a horror growering in his eyes as he saw what lay in Roderick's face. Elgin knelt beside Brahan, feeling for his heart through the bloody shirt.

"Dead," said Elgin, in an empty tone. He turned to look up at Innes, a curious lack of emotion in his voice. "We heard the shot from the post. I told him he was a fool to show you that map."

Roderick made a small, animal sound in his throat, and started walking toward Innes. "My son," he said, "Ye killed my son. Innes. I might hae kenned it. Innes. And I took ye in. Innes."

He kept saying the name over and over again, as if it were a curse, something blasphemous. His great, knobby hands lifted in front of him. Innes stepped back, raising the gun with an instinctive, defensive gesture.

"No, MacAlister," he said. "No. It was Ryker."

"Who's Ryker?" said Elgin, rising from the body.

"Stop, MacAlister," shouted Innes. "Let me explain."

"Ye'll do yure explainin' to the deil," roared Roderick, and jumped at him.

In that last instant, Innes realized he had been too deep in his anger to even reload the gun after that first shot. He did not think he could have fired anyway. One of Roderick's fists knotted up and lifted for a blow. Stumbling backward, Innes

brought the Jake Hawkins across in front of him to block it. The man's fist hit the rifle where the iron barrel joined the stock. There was the sharp splinter of wood, and the gun broke into two pieces, and that fist came right on through to smash into Innes' chest.

Innes heard the hoarse, agonized exhalation he emitted. The pain seemed to fill his whole being for that instant. He had a sense of his body crumpling up. But instinct was still jolting him, and with the conditioning of countless other battles like this, he rolled his body to one side and hit going over and over on the ground, away from Roderick

He had a dim vision of Elgin stooping to grasp the barrel half of the rifle and lunging after him with the deadly iron pipe raised as a club.

COUGHING in a deep, sick way with the pain of that blow in his chest, Innes made a feeble attempt at rising to his knees. Roderick was coming at him again, and would reach him before Elgin. With that flashing glimpse of their two faces, Innes got an instantaneous impression of the crazed, insane light filling Roderick's eyes, and the cold, calculating lack of emotion in Elgin's

Then he had twisted around, not yet fully risen, to dodge Roderick's next blow and lunge in under it against the man's legs. The length of his torso thrown against the man's knees upset Roderick, and he fell across Innes. As the giant Highlander went down, one of his great clawing hands caught Innes' arm, pulling Innes back down off his knees onto the ground.

With both of them wallowing across the buffalo grass. Innes saw Elgin leaping around to put himself in position for a blow. In a terrible, feeble desperation, Innes caught at Roderick's arm, hooking in under the elbow and pulling the man's great body across him. Roderick came willingly, clawing for a grip with his free hand, gasping Gaelic curses. Elgin could not abort his blow soon enough, and the length of the barrel struck Roderick across the thick muscles of his upper back. His sick grunt of agony beat hot and fetid into Innes' face. His massive body sagged heavily against Innes.

Innes caught the rifle barrel before Elgin could lift it again. Elgin tried to pull it loose, and Innes used the opposing force of that to pull himself from beneath Roderick's great, stunned body. Roderick pawed feebly at him. Innes kicked the man's hand free. He felt the rifle barrel slipping out of his hands, with Elgin's savage jerk, and let go completely.

Taken off-guard, Elgin stumbled backward, trying to regain his balance. Innes threw himself at the man, butting him in the stomach. Elgin gasped and went down. Innes went with him, straddling him, beating at that dark, sardonic, mocking face with all the strength left in him.

He heard Roderick groaning behind, and trying to rise. Then he heard Nairn's voice from the river, and turned to see her stumbling up out of the trail. She must have been left behind, unable to keep up with her father and brother in that dogged run, for she was gasping, her face flushed with the terrible exertion, the alisaid torn by brambles, her black hair wild about her face with the wind. She caught at the low branch of an alder, and took in the scene with one swift, understanding glance.

"He killed Brahan," groaned Roderick, getting to his hands and knees, shaking his head like a great, dazed bear. His shirt was soaked with blood across the back where that blow had caught him. "He killed my son."

"No, father," panted Nairn desperately. "He couldn't have. He wouldn't have."

When Innes got up off of Elgin, the man rolled over, pawing at his face and moaning softly, trying in a weak, halfhearted way to rise. Roderick saw Innes get up and started coming to his feet.

"Don't, MacAlister," Innes cried at him. "I don't want to fight you like this. Damn, you, I didn't kill Brahan. I don't want to fight you, there's no reason for it, don't, please——"

With a small, despairing sound, Nairn threw herself in front of her father. He tried to swing her out of the way, but she caught at his torso, winding her legs into his. Still dazed by that blow, he tripped again and went down, on her. Innes heard

her cry of pain as his weight pinned her to the ground, but before he could reach them, Nairn had squirmed from beneath Roderick, throwing herself across him to hold him down.

"Get out," she sobbed at Innes, her face flooded with tears of utter desperation. "Please get out. You'll have to kill him to stop him, and if you can't do that he'll kill you. Oh, please, Innes, get out, go away, while you've got the chance."

Innes stared for that last minute at the pitiful, sobbing figure sprawled over the gigantic Scotsman. A terrible despair shook his whole frame. He heard the sibilant brush of Elgin getting to his feet behind, and knew he did not have the strength left to face them both again. The sound he made, as he turned away to plunge into the timber, was hardly human.

It seemed as if he had been the depository for all the tragedy and death his clan had known for the past five hundred years, and it had lurked somewhere down in the dank depths of his unconscious, waiting for the culmination of this moment, to sweep up and inundate him with the terrible devastating final defeat of his inheritance.

III

SUMMER SUN MADE BRILLIANT glitter on the ice fields of the Wind Rivers. The trunks of aspens traced their delicate silver columns against the dense green of pine on the slopes. Goldenrod looked like patches of yellow sunlight against the curing buffalo grass filling a glade. There was a furtive, darting movement amid the spruce at the edge of this meadow.

It was a man, crouching in the yarrow, plucking at wild strawberries in swift desperation. There was not much humanity left to him. All the marks of the wild hunted animal stamped him. He had no shirt, and his scarred, gaunt torso was burned the color of mountain mahogany by the sun. His feverish, sunken eyes were never still in his narrow skull, shifting back and forth like the dance of light on water. His mouth was hidden in the matted, sandy beard obliterating the long bitter line of his jaw. He had been wild and shy enough originally. Now few would have recognized him as the Duncan Innes of four months ago.

There was a snap of underbrush from across the glade, and Innes leaped back into the brush, crushing the strawberries in his hand till the juice ran red as blood from between his fingers. Deep in the thicket, still running, he turned to look over his shoulder. A brown bear had ambled into the glade, rooting for wild onions. Innes halted himself with great effort, making an angry, snarling sound, and dropped on his hunkers to stuff the crushed mass of strawberries ravenously into his mouth.

The juice dripped into his beard and ran heedlessly onto his chest. The hair on the top of his head was almost white from the sun, and almost black on the sides and back from using it to wipe his hands whenever he ate. He added to that now with a swipe of wet fingers across it.

He caressed the bare blade in his belt for a moment, considering the possibilities of getting the bear with that. It had been two weeks since he'd had meat. The last had been a rabbit, caught in a deadfall after days of patient trailing and waiting. He shook his head finally, realizing how foolhardy it would be with only a knife. There wasn't even a hilt on it. He had found it in a rotting trapper's cabin over in the Shoshones. How long ago had that been?

He looked at the glaciers above and behind him. There were no known trails over the Wind Rivers. He had followed a game trace made by mountain sheep, and had gotten through by chance. He shivered with memory of the freezing night, clambering over ice fields, almost falling into a crevice so deep he had not been able to see the bottom. There were many lucid moments like this, when his mind would work with some logic. But there were other periods he could not remember at all, when he must have run like some animal, aimlessly, thoughtlessly, sleeping when he felt the need, eating when he could find the food. Brahan still came to his mind, occasionally, and he felt a resurgence of that terrible defeat. Mostly, though, it was an apathy. He felt no desire for anything beyond the fundamental necessities.

When his shirt had fallen apart he had not cared about mending it, or getting hide for another. He found within him a growing aversion to human beings, almost a fear. He had assiduously avoided a party of trappers sighted two weeks before. And beneath it all, haunting him, driving him, harrying him till he could never stop moving, like an animal running from the hounds, was the knowledge that he was being followed. He knew Scotsmen, and he knew Roderick. The man would not let the death of his son go unavenged. The man was on Innes' backtrack, somewhere, stubbornly, ungivingly, patiently, sifting out his sign and plodding along after him, inexorable as the curse itself.

Innes rose and started downslope once more. In his mind was a vague idea of reaching the valley before nightfall. It would be somewhat warmer, farther from the ice that never melted up there in the glaciers. Beyond the glade, his eye unconsciously picked up a sign in the earth beside a fallen tree trunk. The print had no heel. A moccasin It was too deep and clear to have been made in dry earth.

How long ago was the last rain? He could remember one two weeks ago. He was safe, then. He rose and swung on down the hill, an aimless, loose-jointed motion entering his body. Within sound of the river below, he came across more sign. It was a broken arrow shaft. It looked like it had been made from a shoot of early berry, and had two wavering red lines painted from the feathers down either side. That would be Dakota. A strange apprehension filled him, and he began to look for those prints again. He found them. Suspicion of years formed a premonition in him, and he began following them. The sign cut to a ford in the Wind River.

He crossed through the freezing, knee-deep water, cut more sign on the other side, went on in dripping leggings. It was still old sign, and it was what fooled him. He almost stumbled into the man. The first sight of him caused Innes to drop into service berries at the very edge of a glade. The rattle caused the man to turn his head this way in a swift jerk.

Recognition closed Innes throat off against breath. It was Wisapa. The Dakota lay in a buffalo robe, propped up against a mossy boulder at the edge of the park. His face was even more haggard than Innes', great black hollows beneath the oblique cheekbones, the eyes sunken till they seemed to be staring from the sockets of a skull. There was so little flesh left that Innes could see the formation of the man's teeth through the skin.

The two of them stared at each other for a long time without speaking. Innes saw the Indian's parfleche bag opened on the ground, its effects scattered over the earth. Beyond that was Innes' old Yerger. The Indian must have taken the rifle from Innes' camp back there in Jackson Hole when Ryker had first jumped him.

INNES WORKED back into the thicket. His first impulse was to run. But the puzzle of this held him by a tenuous thread. He made a complete circle of the park. The only other sign he found was of heeled boots and three unshod horses, going out to the east, and they were as old as the sign he had seen before.

Finally he circled back to where he was nearest his rifle, but still in cover. He had moved so silently the Indian had not heard him approach this second time, and sat staring straight ahead. Sniffing the air, cocking his ears, waiting for a painfully long time, Innes finally rose and darted out, scooping up gun and shotpouch and powder horn from where they lay on the ground, then running back into timber.

He started to load, when, unaccountably, the thought came to his mind. This was the same gun with which his Grandfather had killed George MacAlister back in Virginia. With a strangled sound in his throat, he almost flung the Yerger from him. Would it never stop haunting him? No matter which way he turned. Not just the MacAlisters themselves. Everything he did. Every move he made. It caused him painful effort to retain the piece and load it.

"All right," he said from his covert. "I've got it loaded now. If you don't want a chunk of Galena in you, tell me what this is."

The man stared at him in utter silence. As weak and haggard as he looked, his

eyes were filled with bitter, black defiance. Innes kept going over the signs, trying to obliterate his unreasoning suspicion with the logic of it. There just couldn't be anybody else around. With memory of Brahan, his finger kept twitching against the trigger. It was no more than the Indian deserved. Then a new thought struck him. Wisapa had a bow, and no Indian would waste precious lead on game. Innes reached into his shot pouch. He had carreid extra bars of Galena lead in his possible sack, but there had been only fourteen molded balls in his tiger tail pouch. He counted them carefully. There were thirteen in the pouch, and the one in the gun.

"Ryker shot Brahan?" he said.

The man's eyes had been on his hand in that pouch, and the Indian must have realized how he was figuring. But there was no answer.

"You might save your life," said Innes.

Still no answer. Finally, Innes squirmed in behind the rock, trying to remain in cover, and caught Wisapa beneath the armpits, dragging him back into the shelter of timber. Here he threw the buffalo robe off. Caked blood covered the man's buckskins. They had been cut away from the hip, and a crude buckskin bandage applied. When Innes lifted this off, the ghastly, swollen infection of the wound sickened him.

A purpose he had not held for months filled his movements now. He went into the clearing, scrambling through the parfleche bag for the flint and steel he hoped was there. He found some, and gathered up dead wood for the fire. There was a brass trade kettle still lashed in an aparejo that had been thrown from a horse. Innes pulled the kettle from the pack saddle and filled it with river water. While it was boiling, he hunted for black root along the river bottoms, gathering a double handfull. Putting as much as he could in his mouth, he started chewing on it, while he cleaned the wound with boiled water. Then he rubbed the pulpy poultice of black root into the infection.

He marvelled at the Indian's stoicism. The pain would have been unbearable to a white man in that weakened condition. Bandaging the wound with strips torn from the aparejo, Innes dragged Wisapa in close to the fire, getting enough wood to keep it going should he be gone all night. He piled this within reach of the man, and set off for some game.

That was easy for a man with a gun. He found a buffalo wallow torn apart by rutting bulls, and followed fresh sign into a meadow where a great shaggy beast snorted as it saw him. Innes maneuvered for a heart shot. The detonation of the gun was followed by the beast's roar of agony. The buffalo shook its head, staggered from one side to the other. A great gout of blood spurted from its shaggy coat. It steadied itself, lowering its short-horned head, and rushed for Innes. He turned to run aside and the beast ploughed blindly by. It ran a few yards beyond and then halted again, and with a low, rumbling groan, fell to its side.

He skinned it, cut steaks and backfat and shortribs, cleaned the intestines and looped them over a stick. All this he put in the bloody hide, gathered up the four leg ends, and carried it back to camp.

When Wisapa saw what Innes had brought, a strange, puzzled light tempered the bitterness of his eyes. Innes cut up the steaks to season a broth he made in the trade kettle. He found pemmican in the parfleche bag and thickened the broth with this. He fed it to Wisapa slowly. Then he toasted the intestines over hot coals till it was crispy brown, and fed it in small pieces to the Indian. This was a delicacy to them almost as cherished as beaver tail. Finally, Innes cooked two great steaks for himself, eating the first one almost raw. After the meal, he hunted in the aparejo for some fleshing materials to clean the buffalo hide. He found the tools in a little buckskin bag. There was the leg-bone of a wolf, serrated on one edge, for scraping the hide. He staked the great shaggy skin out, and began fleshing.

"Why are you doing that?" said Wisapa.

His voice was stronger, and Innes gave no sign of his surprise at this abrupt overture. "If we're going to stay here long we'll need some robes," he said. "Winter isn't too far off, and that ice field across the river don't help any right now. Looks of that wound, I don't think you can travel much for a while."

"Perhaps never," said Wisapa. "I have not been able to move from the hips down since Ryker shot me."

INNES LIFTED his head to stare at the man, and all the pieces dropped into place. The Indian had lain there like that, paralyzed, starving, for almost two weeks.

"You didn't shoot Brahan, then," said Innes hopefuly.

"No,' 'said Wisapa. "Ryker came into this country many years ago, trapping and trading with the Indians. It is how I got to know him. I had worked for Hudson's Bay since I was very young. It is how I knew English. Ryker engaged me as an interpreter, and finally as a partner. He convinced me it would ruin the country for anyone but him to find Lost River. If another trapper discovered it, more of his breed would flood in. The trapper always opens the way for the settler, and with the settler, war. The Indian always loses. But Ryker promised if I helped him find Lost River, he would keep its secret. He also gave me his word there would be no killing over it. After we met the young MacAlister at Bridger's Fort, and found out they possessed the map. Ryker and I camped above Hoback Canyon. He said he would try to make a deal with Roderick, but he kept putting it off. We were on the bluffs when you came down to the mouth with Brahan."

"But how did you know it was Brahan who had the map?" said Innes. "He just told you at Fort Bridger that if you wanted it, look up the MacAlisters."

"The older brother was in our camp, once," said Wisapa. "I think he betrayed Brahan in return for a share of Lost River."

The emotion flooding Innes caused him to tremble, sick at his stomach, and then that resolved itself into a hate for Elgin he knew would never die. He gestured at the Indian's legs, speaking gutturally. "How did this happen?"

"When Ryder killed Brahan, my face was turned from him," said Wisapa. "We quarreled here and he shot me. He must have thought I was dead. He went through the aparejos on my pack animal to get what he needed and scattered the rest on the ground like that, and left me lying in the clearing." He paused, staring at Innes. Finally he spoke again, in a quiet resignation. "Ryker has the map, not I."

"I didn't think you had it," said Innes.

"Then why are you saving my life?" asked the Indian,

"Is it inconceivable to you that I just can't go off and let you die?" asked Innes.

The Dakota stared at him for a long period without answering. "That is a very simple reason," he said, at last. "Perhaps that is why it is such a good reason. It is not many white men I have called *kola.*"

"What's that?"

"In my language, it means friend."

A faint, strange warmth pervaded Innes. It was the same feeling he had felt when Brahan called them brother Scots. Then, with a bitter, habituated response, he choked it off.

"Don't make the mistake of doing that," he said. "Anybody who calls me friend is as good as signing his own death warrant."

SUMMER WANED and the red haws began turning brown and the fireweed was losing its flame. Innes built them a dugout against a bluff near the clearing, and for weeks applied the black root to draw the infection from the wound. It was a slow, painful process, with Wisapa delirious and close to death much of the time, but when the first wedge of geese honked south from Bull Lake, the wound had really begun to heal.

The paralysis remained, however, and in mid-September, Innes built a travois upon which to lay the Indian, and taking the place of the horse, hauled him twenty miles to Warm Springs Creek. Here, on a rolling sagebrush bench, was a geyser, known to the Indians for its curative qualities. With the wound healed, Innes could bathe the man daily in its warm, bubbling water, and massage his legs for several hours after each bath. The first snow bore down the branches of the spruces beneath the ledge until they looked like great white umbrellas, but Innes did not let it prevent their bath that day, and a chinook melted the banks before nightfall.

Wisapa could move his legs by now and

was gaining weight. More snow came, turning slopes white, and it was how Innes saw the tracks.

He had come from the dugout they had built just beneath the ledge one morning, looking about for signs of game to replenish their larder. He sighted what he thought were wapiti tracks south of them, emerging from snow-blanketed timber and crossing a park and disappearing again. He told Wisapa he would be back soon, and slipped into the buffalo coat he had made for himself.

The wind was coming from the southwest, and heading south towards the track, he climbed to the ridge where he could sight the animal. He was close enough to the tracks then to see that they were made by only one pair of feet. He dropped to his hunkers behind some fir, realizing how much his suspicion, his wariness had been dulled by these last weeks with the Indian.

Had the man seen him? How could he help it? The dugout was in plain view from the park those tracks crossed, and he had been standing at the door for a long period. An awesome prescience filled him with a knowledge of who this was as certainly as if he had seen the man. His belly begin to constrict with that cramping pain. He could get out now. He didn't want to face this. He didn't want to kill. There was no sense in it. And he would have to, if he stayed—he knew that. It was stupid. It was animal. There was utterly no reason for it. Yet, if he stayed, it was either kill or be killed.

Then get out. He glanced down at the dugout. There would be no returning to it. It was too much in view. He would be a perfect target. And Wisapa, after all these patient weeks? The man was still sick, barely able to move. It would be a alone. Or would they let him survive? After they found an Innes had befriended him. His head turned from side to side in that painful, frustrated way. His every instinct was to run. He didn't think he had ever wanted to do anything so badly in his life.

The sound of the shot filled the canyon. His horrified eyes stared at the furrow in the snow a foot from his elbow. Then he sprawled downslope in a desperate, blind run, hunting for better cover. The detonation had shattered against a granite uplift of a high ridge behind this one, sweeping back across the valley to strike the other slope in a hundred echoes, multiplied to a thousand by the crags and rock faces on that side, till the valley seemed filled with roaring, laughing, clapping explosions.

He went belly-down behind a granite ledge, hands working with the feverish skill of the countless other times he had loaded that Yerger. He dumped powder down the barrel without bothering to measure it in the charge cup. He had long ago used up his linen patches, and he fumbled a buckskin patch from his shotpouch, greasing it with bear tallow from a trap in the stock of the gun, clapping it onto the ball of Galena lead.

Ramming this into the barrel, patch between the ball and bowder, he searched the timber vainly, below and above, for movement that would give the gunman away. He called to the man in a final desperation.

"MacAlister, damn you, don't do this. I don't want to fight. I didn't kill your son. Do you hear that, Roderick? I didn't kill Brahan. I don't want this. I don't want to shoot you. Don't make me. please, don't do this—"

He stopped as he sighted movement. It was above him now, in the cedars, stunted and twisted by the wind. Below him was that park, fifty yards of open snowfield in which he would be a perfect target. Yet this rock ledge was not high enough to protect him. He could not run. It was shoot, or nothing.

"MacAlister, please, I'm begging you, can't you hear me, Roderick? I don't want to fight you, damn you, I don't want to fight——"

THE FLASH OF LIGHT on gunmetal stopped his shouting and brought habituated reaction. Without conscious volition, he brought his own gun-up, and felt the velvety pressure of the trigger, Curly maple jarred his face up as the stock bucked into him with the explosion. He was still partly deafened by it when the

other man's bullet hit the top of the granite shelf in front of Innes, screaming off in a ricochet. Sharp rock chipped into Innes' face. The canyon was filled with those laughing, clapping echoes again.

Then, from the trees up there, a figure staggered out into the snow. He had no rifle, and he was holding his belly with both hands, doubling over deeper and deeper as he stumbled through the deep drift downhill. Finally he was jacknifed so low Innes could see the back of his neck, and he fell over on his face.

Innes waited a long time with reloaded gun, searching the surrounding terrain. Finally he rose and made his way to the man, rolling him over. It wasn't Roderick. It was Elgin.

Innes dropped to his knees beside the man, that awful, bitter despair filling him again. The dark face still mocked him, staring up in sardonic death. Knowing it had been Elgin who betrayed Brahan to Ryker, Innes could feel no sense of vengence, no vindication. He could feel nothing except the black, sinking, overpowering knowledge that this was only further fulfillment of the curse. Now Roderick would be hunting him on two counts.

"Damn you," he told Elgin, between his teeth, in a desperate, sobbing way, "damn you . . . ."

IV

WISAPA HAD THE WISDOM and understanding not to try and penetrate the somber, uncommunicative mood Innes was in now. They hardly spoke all day long, and the Scotsman spent most of the day and half the night searching the forest for sign. It had become an obsession with him. More than once he rose up in his robes in the middle of the night and asked Wisapa if that were not Roderick MacAlister standing in the doorway.

He still tended the Indian, however. The bitter chill of full winter gripped the valley now, and the streams were iced-over, and game was scarce. The two men were on a diet of the jerked meat and pemmican which Innes had prepared for this contingency. Then, one day, a band of Shoshones appeared, traveling south. Innes had a good store of buffalo robes, and quill work Wisapa had worked on during his convalescence, and for this, they traded a couple of mangy ponies. Innes had not meant to use the horses as soon as this. It was the word the Shoshones dropped, just before they left, that gave him the impetus.

They said a giant Scotsman had been sighted in the Wind Rivers. With him was a young woman. They were traveling eastward.

The next day Innes set to work on a buffalo saddle for Wisapa that would carry him comfortably. He finished it that night, and they left the dugout with dawn, with the Indian riding an old beef-steaked paint, and their robes and food packed on the weedy mare. The Dakota country was east of the Big Horns, and it was a bitter, grueling journey. They reached Tensleep Creek, named that by the Indians, for the number of days it took to reach from Colter's Hell. From the heights above Tensleep gorge, they could see over onto the eastern slopes, and though Wisapa allowed no expression to reach his face, there was an excited gleam to his eyes as they ranged over home country. Toward evening, they caught sight of a trapper's cabin snuggled in a cairn halfway down the cliffs into the gorge. There were tracks over the snow, too. Neither of the men cared to stop, however, Innes driven by his haunting fear of Roderick, Wisappa wanting to reach his people as soon as possible. Innes did not notice when the fairly warm west wind began to shift, but Wisapa pulled the horse up sharply.

"We had better seek cover, *kola*. That shifting wind brings a blizzard in this area quicker than you would believe. That cabin?"

"There's no point in turning back that far," said Innes.

"More point than you realize," said Wisapa. "You don't know this section as I do. The blizzards are violent and deadly."

Reluctantly, Innes wheeled in the other direction. Already the chill of the wind was penetrating his buffalo coat. Soon sleet began to come, and they were pushed heavily along by the force of the growing

storm at their backs. Visibility was almost gone by the time they reached the gorge. Innes managed to find a trail down, finally. He felt a tug at the lead line in his hand, and whirled to see the mare slipping over.

His own shout was muffled as he made a last vain effort to drag the kicking beast back onto the shelf, and then he had to let go, and the horse toppled off with a wild whinney that had no sound in the blizzard. Sickly, Innes turned back to Wisapa, lifting him off the other animal, for fear the same thing might happen to the Indian. He half-carried him the rest of the way down.

Reaching the cabin, he tried to open the door, but it would not give. Apparently it was barred from within, and he began to throw the weight of his body against it, feeling the give of rawhide hinges. Then it was thrown open, and he found himself facing a short, massive bear of a man holding an immense Ketland-McCormick in one fist.

"Don't beat the door down," said Ryker. "I wouldn't keep a dog out in a storm like this. Come in, my friends." He chuckled ironically, hoarsely, deep in his throat. "Both my good friends."

Dazed by the storm, Innes could do nothing but stare at the man. Then, answering the imperative wave of Ryker's pistol, he carried Wisapa in. Innes lowered him to a sitting position against the wall. The Indian had not taken his eyes from Ryker, and they had a wide, unblinking glitter to them that started disturbing the man.

"Where's the others?" said Ryker.

"What others?" said Innes, watching that pistol.

"You know what others," said Ryker, glancing in a quick, nervous way at Wisapa, then edging to the door to look out. "I saw tracks on the other side of the gorge this morning."

"We didn't come in by that side," said Innes. "What are you doing here, anyway? Tensleep can't be Lost River."

"Close to it, if the map's right," said Ryker. He had to lean all his weight against the door to shut it, and stood that way, without having dropped the bar into place, his body trembling to the buffeting wind beating at the portal. "I built this cabin when the snow started. Been using it as a base to hunt the Lost River ever since."

"Did it strike you," said Wisapa, "that he can only shoot one of us with that pistol."

"Now wait a minute!" Ryker turned the gun on Wisapa in automatic reaction, then jerked it back to Innes, as the trapper shifted his weight faintly. "Wait a minute. I let you in, didn't I?"

"And you'll kill us when you're good and read," said Innes. "You already tried to kill Wisapa once."

Wisapa turned himself about and dragged himself bodily into a standing position against the wall.

Innes saw what he meant to do, and moved around onto the other side of Ryker so they would approach him from two different directions. Ryker looked from the Indian to the trapper, apparently unwilling to believe their intent. Under ordinary circumstances, Innes would have thought it a foolish thing to do. But it was a certainty in his mind that Ryker did not mean to let either of them live. It might as well be this way as any. And knowing the implacability of Wisapa's purpose, it just wasn't in Innes to let him do it alone. Wisapa started dragging himself down the wall, and Innes took a step toward Ryker. That it was still inconceivable to Ryker showed in his twisted face.

"Don't be crazy," he said, trying to laugh, yet jerking the gun from one to the other. "There's no need for me to kill you. I'll cut you in for shares. We'll find it together and I'll cut you in for shares."

"Like you did Brahan?" said Innes.

The sudden, full shock of realizing they meant to go through with it stamped a bestial contortion on Riker's face. He twisted from side to side, turning the gun on Wisapa, cocking the flat goose-necked hammer with a desperate hook of his thumb, sweeping the big brass-bound weapon back toward Innes.

"No. Listen. Don't be crazy. This is crazy, Innes. I'll kill you——"

"Only one of us, Riker."

"And it'll be you, Innes."

"Will it, Riker?" said Wisapa.

Ryker whirled toward him. His eyes

widened, glittered. The gun jerked higher. Only one more step.

THE DOOR SHUDDERED suddenly beneath a heavy, buffeting weight, knocking Ryker forward so hard his gun went off at the floor. Innes jumped at him, grabbed the gun arm. Ryker twisted beneath him, rolled to the floor, jerking the gun arm loose to beat at him with the heavy weapon. Wisapa threw his body across the arm, pinning it to the floor.

Screaming curses, Ryker doubled up his legs to kick out beneath Innes. A foot caught Innes in the belly, and he slammed against the wall. Wisapa tried to stop Ryker from rolling over on him, but the bearded man possessed immense strength. He left that one arm beneath Wisapa and reached around in a bear hug with the other, putting his weight atop the Indian. Then he caught the roached hair and beat the Dakota's head into the puncheon floor.

Gasping in pain, Innes threw himself back at Ryker, clawing him off Wisapa. For that one instant, he was on the man's back. He thrust a knee into the small of it, hooked desperate arms around Ryker's neck, heaved upward.

Ryker's body bent like a bow in the leverage. There was a loud snapping sound, like a breaking branch. Ryker's body formed no more pressure for the grip; it was like bending a limp sack. Innes released him, letting the lolling head drop to the floor. The mouth gaped, the eyes were open, glassy. The man was dead.

Innes was trembling heavily. He realized it must be reaction. At the time, moving in on Ryker with the gun, he had felt no particular emotion. But it must have created a terrible tension, for he felt so weak and shaken now he could hardly focus his gaze. Then he saw what had come against the door. It was open now, with the howling blizzard piling snow and sleet a foot high across the threshhold. The girl crouched there, staring in horror at them through eyes streaming tears from the wind. The name left Innes in whispered shock.

"Nairn."

"Innes," she said gutturally.

"Those were your tracks Ryker saw across the gorge."

"We were following you," she panted. "We've been following you for months. Dad tried to leave me at several posts, but I came after him everytime. I didn't realize we were this close behind. We found that dugout on Wind River and figured it was yours. And the grave . . ."

"You know who it was?" he asked. They were still crouched there, staring at each other in some sort of dazed spell, oblivious to the shouting gale, unwilling to move.

"Elgin " she said, in a small voice.

"I had to kill him, Nairn," he almost sobbed.

She stared at him a long moment, an indefinable, twisted expression crossed her face. Then it smoothed out, and she was looking at him in that wide-eyed way.

"I still love you, Innes."

"You can't." His shout was animal, guttural. "I killed your brother. Don't you hear? You can't love me——"

"I do, I do!" The spell was broken, now, and they were both stumbling to their feet. She caught at him. "I do love you, Innes, and you've got to get out. Father's behind me somewhere. He'll be coming in. We were about a mile beyond the cabin when the blizzard started. I lost him on the way back. You've got to get out. He's not the same, Innes. He was bad enough to begin with. He would have killed you at the first if I hadn't stopped him. But now he's crazy. He's possessed with it, Innes. You killed his two sons and he's possessed with it. You've got to leave."

"No!" His shout was sharp, edged, and he had released her, backing up against the wall. There was a strange determination on his face. "You asked me once to stop running, Nairn. Here's where I do it. I'm tired of running. It's no use. It follows me wherever I go. If it wasn't your father it would be something else. Ryker's part of it. He wasn't a man, killing and stealing and hurting for a fortune in furs. He was part of the curse. It touches everybody who comes near me. I can't escape it by running."

"Please, Innes, he'll kill you—"

"Let him. What's the difference? I

don't care anymore. I'm through running. You're the only thing I ever really wanted anyway and I can't have you, so what's the difference. Do you hear that, Roderick? Come on. Kill me. I don't care."

"Innes, you're getting crazy as father. Don't. Please. Get out. Please."

"No!" His wild shout lifted above the storm, and he raised his head to roar into it. "Do you heard that, Roderick? I'm through running."

"Aye, Innes, I hear it," said Roderick MacAlister, appearing out of the storm like a ponderous ghost. He swayed there a moment in the doorway, staring ghoulishly at Innes. He was muffled to the chin in a plaid mackinaw. Ice had formed on his brows, giving them a hoary, frosted look. His eyes were red-rimmed and gleaming with a feverish, fanatical light. Innes had seen the same look in Cheyenne Sun Dancers at the peak of their crazed orgies, when the terrible tortures of the ceremonies had robbed them of all reason.

Roderick reached back for the hilt of his claymore where he had it slung in a case behind his back.

"Father," screamed Nairn, throwing herself on him, "Roderick!"

"Out of me way, ye ree loun, I'm goin' to kill this Lalland Innes," said Roderick. With one arm he swept her aside, yanking the huge sword from its scabbard and swinging it down before him. Innes stood back against the wall. He could feel fear in him. He wouldn't deny that, even to himself. Yet his bitter resolve to stop running form something that had haunted him all his life kept his body spread-eagled against the logs.

"Brahan, Innes," said Roderick, moving toward him. "Elgin. That was Elgin, wasn't it? That grave back on the Wind River. He was trailing you. He left even before I did. My sons, Innes, both my sons." He stopped a couple of paces away from Innes, breathing heavily, a sly, waiting, expectant look to his face. As Innes made no move, surprise showed in those little, red-rimmed eyes for a moment. Then he drew in a great, gasping breath, and let the shout go. "Thig Ris, Innes, Thig Ris!"

The sword made a dull glitter in the dusky light. Innes could not inhibit his responses. They jerked him aside uncontrollably in the last instant. The blade struck the log wall with a clanging shudder.

"Thig Ris," bellowed MacAlister, "at it again," and heaved up with the prodigious blade. Innes did not see how Nairn came in. She caught her father's arm, screaming at him.

"Let go, ye whingin' wean, let go, I'm killin' an Innes——"

It was his sword arm he swept her back with. Perhaps it was the pain in her cry that penetrated his fogged mind, Or the horror filling Innes' eyes, staring at Nairn, as she staggered back with the blood spurting from the wound that blade had made in her side. She struck the wall and collapsed in a heap. Roderick dropped his sword and staggered over to her, dropping to his knees. He cradled her limp body in his arm, pawing at the blood covering her dress. At first, calling her name, his voice was a sobbing contrition. It began to grow louder as she did not answer. He felt for her heart.

"Nairn," he screamed, finally. "Nairn, answer me, say I haven' killed ye. Yure own father, Nairn, he couldn't kill ye, tell me I haven't!" He let her sak back, his hand slipping away from her heart, a brassy film covering his eyes. Then, with a great, manical scream, he heaved to his feet. "Nairn," he howled, like a bereft beast, "Nairn, Nairn, Nairn." His voice was lost in the storm as he lunged out the door, screaming it over and over.

"Roderick," shouted Innes. "Don't. You'll go off the cliffs——"

It was impulse more than anything else driving him out after the man. It couldn't have been thought. The last few moments seemed to have shocked all capacity for that from him. He stumbled into the blizzard, catching sight of the gigantic, plunging figure ahead of him. Roderick seemed to halt for a moment on the edge of the cliff. Innes shouted at him. Then his figure was gone.

Innes staggered to the bluff, staring downward. He wondered, dully, whether the man had fallen, or had deliberately cast himself off. He sank to his knees, eyes still turned down into the gorge.

Murk hid the bottom, hundreds of feet below. It seemed to draw him.

Why not? There was nothing left for him. He knew now for a certainty that Roderick had thrown himself off, deliberately. And he could understand why. It was the logical thing, when there was nothing left in life. It would be so easy. He squinted his eyes shut against the sight of Nairn's dead body back there in the cabin, of Elgin's dead body, of the pain in Brahan's dead face, of John Donn lying there in a Shoshone grave, of the chain of tragedy and death that he had left on his backtrail.

And now it was over. He would finish it. He could face no more of it. Slowly, inexorably, the defeat inclined his body forward.

"Kola!"

Innes jerked, straightened, seemed to lift from a trance. When he wheeled about, he saw Wisapa dragging himself down across the trail. Innes turned reluctantly back to the man, shaking his head.

"The girl is not dead," Wisapa told him. "I staunched the blood. It's a bad wound, but if we can get her to my people, I think she will live. You saved my life, *Kola,* you can save hers."

Innes' heart beat against his ribs with painful force. He ran past the Indian, into the room, where Nairn lay on the floor, covered by a robe. He dropped to his knees beside her, catching a pale hand. She looked up weakly.

"Something must have snapped in your father when he thought he'd killed you," said Innes, answering the question in her eyes. "He ran out. The cliffs . . ."

She closed her eyes, a poignant grief pinching her face, whitening it. Her breast lifted beneath the robe, with the breath she took. Finally she spoke, carefully.

"You're not to blame, Innes. He brought it on himself. As much as he meant to me, it's the truth."

"You'll be all right," he said. "We'll get you to Wisapa's camp . . ."

"Of course I will. You'll stay with me, won't you, Innes. It's over, now. You've beaten the curse." She must have seen the way he squinted his eyes and shook his head from side to side, for she lurched up, catching feebly at his arm. "Yes, you have. You stood up to it. You stopped running. You refused to perpetuate it. And you won. There's no reason for it to go on. We're together, aren't we? An Innes and a MacAlister. That in itself refutes the whole thing."

"She's right," said Wisapa. He held up the map and journal of Father Escobar which he must have found on Ryker. "You have these now. We can find Lost River. With you, I know it will not harm my people."

Innes took the book and map. Ryker must have been building a fire in the fireplace when they entered, for the coals were still glowing. Innes put some more wood on, and when the flames began to snap, threw the map and book in it.

"That way you can be sure your people won't suffer," he told Wisapa. "We couldn't really wipe the slate clean with those around. It's what started all this trouble."

Wisapa bowed his head humbly. "You are a greater man than I thought . . . *kola.* When I tell my people what you did, you will have their lifelong respect. It is something few white men can command."

That vagrant smile caught at Innes' lips, flashing across them like sunlight on dark waters for a moment. He moved back to Nairn, taking her hand. Then he looked into the flames, licking about the little leather-covered book, and for a moment, the mysticism of his Celtic blood asserted itself, and he spoke to the fire with all the naive sincerity of a savage propitiating some ancient god.

"Do you see this, Alister Mor," he said softly. "An Innes and a MacAlister joined. That's something you never believed would happen, isn't it? I think that's something all your curses in the world can't harm."

"I *know* that's something they can't harm," smiled Nairn.

UTE UPRISING

By WILLIAM MORETON

Here's a thrilling, personal account of Indian fighting on the open prairie.

BEING laid off late in the fall as soon as the beef herd was in the railroad stock yards in Cheyenne, I rustled around and got a job driving a delivery wagon for Larry Brenahan, who ran the largest butcher shop in town.

All through the bitter winter weather I delivered meat to all parts of town. Fierce winds from the crests of the Rockies kept the town free from snow. The rounded gravel from the flats west of town rolled steadily through the main street and eastward.

On Sunday in early spring I met one of the teamsters who had been with the government wagon trains. He told me he was employed by the government as a packer, station at Camp Carlin Supply Depot. Town was not to my liking, so I asked him to get me on if possible. June came. I quit my delivery job and was waiting to go north on the spring roundup when "Tony" came from Camp Carlin to get me.

Carlin lay about three miles west of Cheyenne and close to the railroad. Fort Russel lay farther west but away from the U. P. track. The surrounding country was a military reservation. Large numbers of government mules were herded on it. That was my first job, riding a frisky little mule. I daily drove the herd to a fresh feeding grounds. The mules knew to the minute when they were due

at the corral to receive their ration of oats.

I used to hold up their return for the fun of watching them break through on all sides of me like water over a falls. The interior of the walled camp held enormous supplies of all kinds. Also great piles of condemned military supplies such as saddles, bridles, tin cups, knives, forks and spoons.

Some dated back to the Sioux Campaign of '76, but not sent in from the various posts until later years. My main interest centered in the equipment used in packing, government style. I'll confess to complete ignorance of that style of transportation. Instead of a pack saddle, a stuffed pad faced with leather was flung over the pack mule. The pad came well down the animal's side. A surcingle cinched the pad on. A broad strap passed around the breast. Two broad straps in the rear were united by a small round piece of leather passed under the tail where it joined the mule's body.

Inspections were held every week. The mules were lined up. Two men to a mule. The Aparajoes flung on and cinched. Boxes and bales were laid on, and the lash rope with cinch attached, passed around. The diamond hitch that drew the pack tight from four places was spread and drawn tight by both packers. The long train fully packed with two hundred pounds or more on each mule, was paraded around the enclosure for inspection and then dismissed.

One morning when I was on duty my attention was directed to Fort Russel. From my position on high land about a mile from it, I could clearly hear the bugle calls and see the troops massing on the parade grounds. I knew some important news had reached the fort. No recall signal came from Carlin to me. Keeping an eye on both Fort and Carlin, I watched for the next move.

In an hour's time two troops of cavalry headed by a band on horseback issued from the fort. I was in a sweat to learn the news. The cavalary soon covered the distance to Carlin and disappeared inside its high walls. From the movements of the cars and engine from town I felt certain sure that something thrilling had happened.

When I returned to camp in the evening, the cavalry had been loaded on the cars, run out to the main line and on their way. I learned of the Ute uprising in Northern Colorado, and their attack on the Agency. Troops from the posts nearer the scene were on their way. The cavalry from Russel was going to cooperate with them. There was a tense feeling shared by everyone. The next day, orders kept the pack mules in camp.

Inspection and checking by the quartermaster's force kept us alert. Some of the old-timers among the packers began recalling the days when they were in hostile country. The second night after the cavalry had left, we were sound asleep when the sergeant burst in the packers' quarters and brought us to our feet with his foghorn bellow.

The men (and even the mules) were well trained. Cars were strung along the platform inside the walls. Mules were led up on the platform and into the cars by the feeble light of lanterns. Equipment and loads were hustled on board by many hands. Everybody had a chance to eat breakfast before the detachment of cavalry under a lieutenant arrived from Fort Russel.

All sorts of rumors went around. By the time we had passed the summit of the Rockies going west, the news passed that the main body of troops had been checked by the Indians, and waited to be reinforced by other troops.

Our pack train carried ammunition mostly, which was needed. About one o'clock, the long train of cattle cars and coaches stopped at the lonely siding and cleated runways were slanted up to the doors. The animals were led down and tied to long picket lines. It was a busy time.

EACH team of two packers had nine mules to take care of, seven pack mules and two riding ones. Packing had to be done quickly. The boss packer would ride by the packs and note any unbalanced or improperly placed or tied ones. There was a sour note in his order to "strip that mule and pack it right."

The cooks had set up shop and mess call

found no laggards. I was busy cleaning out my mess tins when looking south I saw a white man on horseback running swiftly towards our camp. Behind him were eight or ten Indians in close pursuit.

To my surprise the white man and Indians came right into camp on a dead run. Checking their horse to a dead stop from full speed, the white man, Colorado Charlie, who was chief scout, passed some papers to the Lute in charge of our bunch.

The Indian scouts were not the picturesque red men people may imagine. Some wore huge cavalry boots, sky blue army pants, with the seat cut out, and a red scarf tied around their head. Some wore moccasins and britch-clouts. One dandy was the proud possessor of a derby hat. All had McClellan saddles on their ponies.

They looked wild and woolly with their faces streaked and dotted with red, black and yellow colors. All were armed with government issue carbine, Cal. .45-70.

The bugler was soon ripping out the assembly. Packs were adjusted quickly and what a few minutes before was a littered couple of acres, seemed strangely silent and bare as I swung aboard my little mule and followed the rear of the long pack train south.

To the east the crest of the Rockies resembled a continuous line of moderate hills. We were traveling on high table lands. From my position in the rear of the pack. I had a splendid view of the whole train. About a hundred mules, including extras, strung out in single file in a lengthy string. The soldiers riding point, and heading the pack train added a touch of color to an otherwise drab looking procession. A rear guard of six men completed the long line.

As for the Indian scouts, I was told they always kept far in advance. From the time we lined out from the rail-road until the hostiles were closing in on us, I never saw them. The air at our elevation was crisp. The rich mountain grass was just high enough to give the impression of traveling over a vast well kept lawn. Camp was made on a grassy flat through which ran a small brook fed by the snow which still lingered on the mountain peaks.

About two o'clock in the morning the camp was roused by the loud challenge of a sentry. It was Cheyenne Charlie with dispatches. Word was passed by the chief packer to catch up and feed the mules along the hundred and fifty-foot picket line. This was supported about every sixteen feet, by four-foot long iron rods, sharp at point, and an eye on the other end to pass the rope through.

There would be no more bugle calls. Two days rations were issued to every man, and the pack train was to travel four-abreast. One packer to ride between the columns, while his pardner rode in the rear of their seven mile string. That arrangement insured keeping the different columns separated and a quick corraling of the train in case of attack.

Not that any of these men were cowards. They proved their dogged bravery under fire. At the first tinge of dawn, packs were adjusted and securely lashed. The soldiers led at a quick walk, followed by the bunched up pack train. We were now traveling through one of the beautiful mountain parks Colorado is so famous for. The gentle green slopes made it easy traveling.

The wooded heights gave a dignity to the vast park lying at their feet. The command had traveled fifteen or sixteen miles from the last camp. The mules were being urged ahead at a rapid walk. The park's southern border was near. I was wondering what the country would be like on the other side of the hills in front of us. Suddenly those hills were topped by our Indian scouts.

They were riding criss-cross, the Indian sign for *enemy is coming*. Though they were two or more miles away, they stood out plainly in that clear air. The rear guard soldiers galloped forward to join their comrades. The lieutenant gave the chief packer orders to take the pack train to the top of a low rounded hill about a quarter of a mile west of the line of march.

We sure were a busy bunch for the next half hour. As soon as we reached the top of the hill, the mules were strung in a close circle, the packs jerked off and piled high enough to protect a kneeling man. No one could spare the time to watch what the soldiers were doing. We strung our picket lines and secured the mules inside our

circle. The soldiers had started to climb the hill, evidently, for my first glimpse of the scene showed Indian scouts and soldiers riding pell-mell toward the flats. Only Colorado Charlie sat his fine chestnut colored horse on the hill top. Our eyes soon discovered the reason for the troops hasty retreat.

OUT OF THE GAP in the hills poured about fifty Ute hostiles. A race was on. Troops and Indians drew nearer on converging lines. We watched breathlessly as they neared each other. Suddenly the troops halt and squaring their horses, pour a volley into the flying Indians.

Once more the twenty-one carbines loosed their puffs of smoke. The hostiles veered at a tangent and did not stop until they were out of range.

One Indian went down, three ponies floundered on the ground. How quickly two warriors rode to each side of the fallen man! Leaning down each grabbed a hand and away they sped, dragging the dead warrior.

The dismounted Indians leaped nimbly behind their comrades who circled back to their rescue. As soon as the hostiles left the road open, our brave Indian scouts came on a run toward our hill. Instead of going up they skirted the base of the hill and with feet beating a tatoo on their ponies ribs and arms aflopping, they disappeared for good.

The troops came toward our hill on a walk. Us packers had the scene spread before us on a grand scale. As the troops neared our hill, we had the thrill of watching Colorado Charlie make his run to safety. He had descended the hill—was coming on at a leisurely lope when the hostiles spotted him. His quick eye saw his danger. His lope changed to a sweeping run. The half-dozen bucks on their swiftest ponies came flying to cut him off. You could hear the fellows groaning as they watched the Utes closing in on Charlie. But the next minute everyone on the hill was standing up, waving their hats and cheering.

The gallant chestnut carried his rider passed the danger point with fifty yards to spare. The soldiers came up the gentle slope, talking and laughing. Horse gear was added to the barricade. A deep pit was dug in the hill top. The Lute had all the canteens containing water collected. Later we learned that our scout had seen from his hill, another band of Indians circling to cut off our retreat. Each packer had been issued a .45 Colt revolver and a hundred rounds of cartridges.

The hostiles had many Springfield rifles that out-ranged the carbines of the troopers. Fortunately they were mighty poor shots at longe range. Our situation as night approached seemed fairly good. We knew we were surrounded by at least a hundred hostile Indians. We hoped commanders of the troop who expected us, would know something had happened and would come to our rescue.

Lack of water was a serious handicap. The nearest stream was close to the hills from which the Utes came to attack us—so was fully controlled by them. Just the idea of not having water, seemed to give me a terrible thirst. My pardner, Lonnie Jackson, came to my rescue.

Lon had served the government as a soldier and a packer on western campaigns for many years. He simply reached and drew his sheath knife, stuck it into the grass and dug up a bunch of round white roots. "Here, kid," he said, "is food and water."

As darkness fell a line of pickets were spaced around the hill and about fifty yards from the barricades. A soldier and a packer so as to space a rifle between each revolver. My two hours came in the first watch. All I could remember is how my eyes ached as I tried to pierce the darkness in front of my position. I could hear the soft crushing of the grass, as the men eased their bodies twenty feet or more on each side of me.

The two hours finally passed and our relief come creeping out. The strain of the day's happenings combined with the stretch of guard duty, left me exhausted. I was barely able to crawl over the packs and flop on the ground dead to the world.

I learned afterwards that my pardner, Lonnie, saved me from another tour on post. However the first faint sign of dawn, everyone was awakened and man-

ned the breast works until clear day light arrived. After we relaxed, I learned Cheyenne Charlie had been sent out to try and get through the Indian lines the nearest ones, but ran smack dab into a big bunch that almost had him surrounded. By lying still with a blanket over his head until the Indians moved further away he inched his way out of his uncomfortable surroundings; and as morning was near, headed back to the beleaguered hill.

Coffee was made and a half a pint served to each man. I used my share of it to moisten my hard tack. The sun came up over the mountain peaks, promising clear dry weather. The hostile shots came zinging shortly after sunrise. They came from the crest of the hill to the south, and about six hundred and fifty yards distant. The hill was slightly higher than ours.

Casualties mounted swiftly among the mules and horses. Men's faces showed hard and deeply lined. The Lute was making a prolonged study of the hill top through his field glasses. I asked Lon if the Lute could see the Indians who were shooting at us. "No, he can't," said Lonnie, "your eyes are good. Do you see the grass on the top of that hill?"

"Yes," I said.

"All right, kid. You watch that grass closely, and tell me what you see."

Sure enough, I could see a little bunch of grass rise and slowly settle back. By constant sweeping, my eyes caught several bunches of grass in slow movement. The soldiers kept up a constant fire from their carbines.

THE LAST of the live stock were down by four o'clock. Only an occasional shot now came from the Utes. We were dirty, sweat-streaked and thirsty. Firing died down from the hill. Roots were dug and sucked dry. This kept the tongue from dry swelling. The old campaigners among the soldiers and packers made no fuss. In fact, most of them slept despite the crack of guns around them.

A few men were sent out as listening posts. Some time in the evening, both scouts were sent out from different points on the hill. About a mile and a quarter south, the Indians were seen gathering in the late afternoon. They appeared to be holding a council. "Watch out," the old campaigners said," either they've got word troops are coming, or they're planning some new deviltry.

The stars were still shining the next morning, when I was wakened by my pardner, Lonnie. He had plucked dew-ladened grass and washed my feverish face. A soldier scout had returned with the information he had got close enough to the Indians to hear them riding in from different directions. Again the old timers prophesied: the Indians are skeddadling—or they are going to jump us.

For the first time the young lieutenant gathered packers and soldiers to a council. All packers who had served in the army were to be grouped with the soldiers. Should any soldier be disabled the ex-soldier nearest was to take his gun and ammunition. Should the Indians charge, our fire was to be with-held until they were within fifty yards.

I'll confess to an all-gone feeling as we silently found our places behind the heaped up packs. The stars showed morning was near at hand. From the low murmur of the men near me, I gathered their belief was that both scouts had succeeded in getting through the hostile lines.

A little tinge of light shown on the eastern mountain tops. It strengthens, throwing the rugged mountains in high relief. My sensitive ear caught a low soft rumble, "What's that?"

"Horses fording a creek," gasped a packer. I was shaking in every limb.

Light was sending it's probing points at our hill now. Grass become visible on the slope in front. Then the sound came. The low vibrant thud of many hoofs on grassy sod. The air was split with ear piercing yells of blood curdling intensity. On they came out of the gloom, charging up the slope, directly at our position. I had eyes for no one but the charging Utes. My trembling left me, and in my excitement I rose to my feet and thrust my revolver out in front of me. All I can remember of the next few seconds is saying to myself: *"we'll never stop them,"* and cocking and firing my Colt into the approaching mass of painted demons.

But stop them we did, though one warrior was so close when he was shot that his body was flung from his horse to the top of our barricade. I saw Indians tumble from their horses. Horses squeal and rear from wounds, and Indians divide right and left and fly out of range. My revolver was empty, but I kept trying to shoot, as the Utes swept along my front.

Croaking cheers rose from the parched throats of our bunch. Shocking profanity followed the Indians retreat. Comrades patted each other on the back and some tried to dance a jig. They felt and acted their joy and relief from the horrible death. We took stock of ourselves individually first, and what happened to us all next.

Two soldiers and one packer dead. Five wounded; two seriously. It was agreed we must reach water as soon as night fell. The cries of the wounded for water was unnerving. The Indians had drawn off to and across the creek. The scant amount of water found was passed to the wounded.

In looking over the dead animals I found a bullet had reached Colorado Charlie's beautiful chestnut-horse.

No one could swallow food. About three o'clock, sentinels reported the hostiles drawing off. Half an hour later they had all disappeared. It was hard work restraining the packers from leaving camp for water.

The soldiers had to surround them. An hour later a far distant bugle call was heard. All past sufferings was forgotten. In a few minutes, a troop on cavalry topped the hill to the east and came towards us. A detail of cavalry gathered our canteens and quicktimed it for water. A second troop had caught sight of the retiring Indians and gave chase. It was their bugle we had heard echoing over the plains.

The Indians fled and the troop came to camp about sun down. Graves were dug and a captain read the burial service. Mournful taps echoed from the hills, as we bid farewell to the fallen. Camp was moved on the horses to the flat boarding the brook. After a bath and plenty of Arbuckles Arosia, I lay down and slept in my blankets.

We lay in camp nearly a week, taking it easy. By that time the fighting was over. A train of U. S. wagons came. Our stuff was loaded, two ambulances carried the injured. The rest of us were stowed in the wagons. Arriving in good shape at Camp Carling. In a few days I got my discharge, went into Cheyenne. There after buying a new suit of clothes, I had my picture taken on my sixteenth birthday.

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WATCH FOR IT!

TOMAHAWK AMBUSH

By HENRY RICHARDSON

Branded a tenderfoot and a coward by the trail-wise wagoneers, young Jeff Lane, the eastern schoolboy, crept alone into a screaming hell-fire of redskin massacre. But even after he returned, there was yet one last test . . .

JEFF LANE lurched in the high seat of the covered wagon as it dipped down the trail toward the sun scalded valley. Resentment lay in the depths of his gray eyes as he watched Will Parker, the wagon train leader, ride back toward him.

Jeff tensed in his seat and his resentment deepened. A tall, blond, muscular youngster, Jeff Lane was dressed in the rough clothes of a teamster. But even the layer of trail dust could not hide the stiff newness of his hickory shirt.

As Will Parker reined up beside Jeff's team of mules, the tension within the youth began to grow. Jeff Lane's eyes came up slowly to meet Parker's scathing gaze. Jeff braced himself, gripped the reins more firmly as he waited for Parker's outburst.

Jeff clutched at the slippery, writhing torso. His knife drove in . . . again and again . . .

"All right, Lane! Close it up!" Parker shouted. "Indians all around us and you drivin' like the tenderfoot you are. How do you expect us to reach the cavalry tomorrow with you pokin' along that way? Keep it closed up, dammit!"

Jeff Lane's cheeks stained a deep red. Angrily, he slapped the mules with the rein tips as he watched Parker ride away. It had been this way ever since that day in Independence when Jeff had signed up as a driver.

Jeff had run out of money in Independence. There, he had seen a girl, Nancy Parker. He had watched her walking calm and serene through the turmoil and clamor and loading wagons. He had looked again at her slim beauty and he had decided then that whatever train she was with, he would join it.

That Will Parker's train had been short a driver had seemed a stroke of fortune—until Jeff had discovered Parker's intense dislike for him. Later, when Parker's daughter, Nancy, had smiled at Jeff, when the two of them had gone walking together in the twilight, Parker, watching, had liked Jeff even less. Thus, the friction between them had been born. Parker, the rough and tough trail boss who would have no truck with a tenderfoot, just out of college, who had found an interest in Parker's daughter.

Jeff knew that Parker looked upon him with the practical frontiersman's skepticism of the learned, that the leader thought of him as a dreamy weakling who could never measure up to the West. Parker had resented him ever since they'd left Independence and had seen to it that Jeff had been given the most obstinate team to drive. And for days, now, Parker had been watching Jeff like a hawk, grasping at every opportunity to point out his failings, to humiliate him, to show him up in a bad light before the eyes of his daughter.

The wagon reached the bottom of the grade and Jeff glanced over the valley floor ahead. Heat from the westering sun boiled down from the sky and shimmered from the wind tortured domes of rock that hemmed them in. It was a burned-out world of reds and browns and yellows, with only an occasional touch of green where life-giving water welled up. It was like the inferno that was Jeff Lane's mind. A scorching wind that carried before it the smell of brimstone.

"Don't take it so hard, Jeff!"

Startled, Jeff looked around. Nancy Parker had ridden up on her pinto, was watching Jeff from dark, half-amused eyes. A faint smile traced itself across her young red mouth.

He grinned in spite of himself. "I didn't know I looked *that* sour," he said.

He saw the concern come into her eyes an instant later. She frowned. "Dad been riding you again, Jeff?"

The lines of his face went taut. "No worse than usual."

He glanced at Nancy's tanned, capable hands. She was keeping the pony in check easily, matching the slow speed of the lumbering wagon.

"You're doing fine," the girl said approvingly. "A lot better than Dad should expect from an eastern college man. Don't blame him too much, Jeff. He's worried. And from the looks of things, he has a right to be." Suddenly, the girl stood straight in her stirrups; glanced at the distant hills that rimmed the valley. Jeff turned to follow her gaze, saw the puffs of smoke billowing up from the hilltops.

He saw the pallor come into the girl's cheeks, heard her whisper, "Indian smoke signals, Jeff . . ."

AGAIN, there was tension in him but it was a different kind of tension. "You'd better get back with the other wagons," he warned. "I don't like the looks of things . . ."

With a wave and a nod, Nancy Parker wheeled her horse around and rode off into the dusty haze. He watched her ride away and he was sorry that there had been no time for him to learn to shoot a gun. He felt a protective urge. If anything happened to the girl . . . it was a thought that he refused to carry to its conclusion.

A drumming roll of hooves rattled through the heat as Joe Dean, the chief scout, galloped into view, leaning low over the neck of his lathered buckskin pony.

The scout's arm was rising and falling rhythmically as he urged his mount ahead. He came up to Parker and reined up sharply.

"Three Sioux war parties," the scout shouted. "They're closin' in fast!"

Parker whirled and cupped his hands to his mouth. His voice blared out like a trumpet, carrying the full length of the line.

"Circle!" he warned. "Around the spring just ahead! Full speed!"

The lead wagon team sprang into a wild, charging run, hurling streamers of dust high into the wind. The wagon in front of Jeff lurched ahead. Jeff eased up on the reins, and shouted to his mules. They sprang into the collars. The wagon rocked and swayed as it gained speed on the rough rutted trail.

Parker rode up abreast of Jeff and leaned his heavy body far to the side. His piercing eyes jabbed from under his grizzled brows. He shouted above the clatter of the wagon.

"Keep a line on them mules, now! It ain't important what happens to you—but we need that gunpowder you're haulin'!"

Jeff gave Parker an angry nod. The mules had the bits in their teeth and were running in frantic lunges. Their noses were close upon the wagon ahead, and the rattling of the farm implements it carried frightened them. Jeff's arms were almost pulled from their sockets as he held the reins, fighting to keep them from breaking around the wagon.

The lead wagon breasted the clump of willows that marked the spring. Jeff could see its white canopy tilt far to the side as the driver turned without checking speed. They began to circle. Standing to peer through the billowing dust, Jeff threw a quick glance to the rear. Just behind him, Bond, on the meat wagon, was snaking a long whip over the backs of his laboring team. Behind that, more supply wagons, bringing up the rear.

Jeff's wagon bounced and tilted as it left the trail. He spread his feet wide to keep his balance. Ahead, he could see the white canopied tops as the front wagons formed half the arc of a circle. A wild, piercing cry sifted through the rumble of speeding wagons. Other voices joined in a chorus of high, screaming yells that made Jeff's hackles rise even before he looked around.

POURING over the rim of the valley was a line of gaunt, wiry ponies. Wild eyed ponies, with streamers of scarlet tied to manes and tails, their spotted sides smeared with gaudy paint. On their bare backs, clinging like lizards, sat lean, naked men, their coppery hides daubed in the grisly paint of war. They waved aloft buffalo lances and rifles, keening out their blood-curdling challenge.

Jeff swung his eyes to the other side of the valley. Another column of savages raced toward the wagons, sweeping through the dry, brittle grass. This was no mere harrying raid, like others they had experienced. This was a full scale attack.

From the attacking line, puffs of smoke appeared, followed by the dry cough of rifles. A ball whistled through the canvas behind Jeff's head. He ducked, and swung his whip, yelling at the mules.

The lead team had circled the willows now, was turning in to close the circle. Answering puffs of smoke were beginning to spout from the rear of the wagons.

Suddenly, Jeff's frightened mules swerved, then lunged out of line. Cursing, he threw his full weight to turn them. At that instant the left front wheel bounced high over a rock. Jeff lost his balance, but held to the reins. His feet clawed frantically for support. But the mules gave another lunge and Jeff fell backward over the side.

Jeff struck the ground with stunning force, but bounded to his feet, still holding the reins. Desperately, he dug in his heels and slid. Another rock, and his feet were plucked from under him, and his face plowed the grass. The reins slipped from his hands.

Jeff raised his head in time to see the wagon careening away behind the wildly running mules. It tilted on two wheels, bounced, and then turned over. Jeff saw the dark bulk of the powder barrel hurtle

through the canvas top. He saw it bound, and splinter, loosing a black flood upon the rocks, well beyond the circle of wagons. The mules dragged the wrecked wagon away, unheeded.

Jeff lay numb with horror. Then the rattle of gun-fire and the chorus of wild screeching came through to him. He jumped to his feet and ran for cover. The drivers had closed in now, the wagons end to end, with the teams turned inward, but the dust of their movement was still heavy in the air.

An Indian on a paint-daubed pony loomed through the thinning pall. Jeff forced his aching limbs to greater speed, but at that moment the brave saw him. With a wild yell, the Indian raised his lance and charged.

The wagons were almost in reach, and Jeff made a running dive. The lance ripped through his shirt, and grazed his side as he rolled to safety under a wagon. The report of rifle clapped against Jeff's ear, and he saw the Indian slip from the pony and pitch to the ground with a sodden thud. Jeff turned toward the sound of the shot. Will Parker was standing by the wagon, ramming a new charge into his muzzle loader.

The train captain's face was twisted into a mask of rage. His eyes were glittering slits, and his voice rasped like steel on steel.

"Don't know why I bothered to save you," he snarled. "Now, what're we gonna' do for gun powder? I shoulda' known better than to hire a *college boy.*"

Jeff's eyes fell before the older man's baleful glare.

Short gasps of air filled his tortured lungs, but all through him was the sick feeling of guilt and failure.

"There must be more gunpowder," he began.

"Get outa' my sight!" Parker shouted. "You know there isn't."

Jeff hesitated, then crawled slowly out from under the wagon.

He rose to his feet, and tight lipped, walked away.

A grizzled driver glanced at him and quickly looked off into the distance. Cold stares from the other defenders told him that they all knew what had happened. He turned away, sick at heart.

He saw Nancy under the clump of willows at the spring. She was helping worried mothers shoo their children to safety behind hastily piled boxes and bales. Nancy looked at him without smiling. Her eyes held something that he could not fathom. Not cold, like the others, and yet——

At a sudden cry of dismay from one of the defenders, he turned and peered between two wagons. A chorus of shrill yells rose from near the rocks where the barrel had fallen. Indians were dismounting, scooping the black powder into pouches—scattering it.

A FUSILLADE of bullets whistled from the wagon train, but a mounted party wheeled to attack, drawing the teamsters' fire. Jeff heard a man growl and curse as he reloaded.

"Now they know we're short of powder! They'll wear us down, and then——" The teamster drew his finger across his throat in a grim gesture.

Jeff felt a chill of desperation run through him as the Indians re-grouped and dashed in again in a sweeping, swirling charge. He seized a rifle and drew a bead on a warrior who rode in close to hurl a lance. At almost point-blank range, he fired, but the Indian rode away untouched. Jeff cursed bitterly, and glanced over his shoulder. Will Parker had seen. The wagon leader's eyes were like chips of glacial ice in his craggy face.

Then Parker called a hurried council. "We're in a tough spot." His voice was worried. "All the powder we've got is what's in our pounches——so we've got to make every shot count. If we're lucky, we can hold out until dark.

"The Indians won't attack at night. They won't chance gettin' killed in battle in the dark. But if we're out of powder at dawn——" He paused significantly. Then he went on.

"If there's any cookin' to be done, do it now. We don't want 'em pickin' us off against firelight after dark—because they will pester us, even if they don't really attack. All right, men, back to your guns!"

He turned and cast a withering glance at Jeff. "You cut wood for the women! That's about your speed."

Jeff turned blindly away. Misery welled up in him as he hunted for an axe.

Later Jeff began to lop off dead branches from the willows and chop them up. Activity helped push his troubles back in his mind, but when several fires were blazing he stopped to mop his brow. At once the feeling of shame rose up to choke him.

He heard the scurry of hoooves again, and the yells of the attackers. Guns racketed around and under the wagons. At every shot from a defending teamster, Jeff winced. He saw coppery bodies slip from their ponies and roll to the ground. But there were many Indians. Many more Indians than there were rounds of ammunition. And it was his fault.

Jeff seized the axe again and began chopping furiously at a willow log. He tried to stop his churning thoughts, tried to close his ears to the sound of battle about him.

The axe glanced from a knot, and he felt a sharp pain in his leg. He sat down abruptly, clutching at the oozing red above his boot top.

Suddenly Nancy was beside him, her hand upon his arm, her voice concerned.

"Jeff, you're hurt! Let me——"

Shame burned deeper in him, and he shook his head fiercely. He wrapped his bandana around his leg, and tugged it tight. As he looked up he saw Will Parker watching him from a wagon. Contempt and disgust were plain on Parker's harried face. He glanced at Nancy. She had turned away, but not before Jeff had seen the frown in her eyes.

As the afternoon wore on, the Indians changed their tactics. They made no more full-fledged charges. They circled just out of range, swooping in singly or in small parties, threatening, taunting, trying to draw fire. Cool headed marksmen among the teamsters took their toll, but every one in the wagon train knew that the sorties would continue until there was no answering fire. No one spoke of what would happen after that.

Jeff carried more wood to the fires. He saw Parker approach Joe Dean, who was tightening the saddle girth on a roan.

"What are you up to, Joe?" Parker asked.

"Goin' for help!" the scout replied.

"It'll be dark in a few hours," Parker glanced at the lowering sun. "Wait until then. You'll never make it now."

Dean jerked the strap into place, and turned to face the train captain. Jeff noticed his drawn, taut expression. "I've made the rounds myself, Will," he said, "I know how much powder the boys have left——a few hours, an' it'll be too late."

Parker's look was doubtful. "How will you get through?"

"You see the way they're circlin'? I'll wait 'til they're bunched up on one side, an' make my break on the other. This gelding of mine is faster'n anythin' they've got, an' if I get a start before they see me, there's a chance . . ."

"You'll never make it!" Parker insisted.

The lean scout shrugged. "I can try."

Parker shook his head. "I can't let you do it!"

JOE DEAN looked at Parker for a long moment, then he said quietly. "We haven't got a chance this way. We were supposed to meet the cavalry tomorrow. They'll come lookin' for us when we don't show up—but that'll be too late. I'd rather lose my hair ridin' than sit here an' wait for them red devils to come an' git it!"

Parker spread his hands resignedly.

Dean led his horse to the opening between two wagons and mounted. He waited while the encircling Indians split into two groups, riding past the train to join at the rear. Then he drove in his spurs, and the roan plunged into the open. Anxious eyes watched him disappear in a cloud of dust that trailed him to the rocks at the valley's edge.

Screams of rage came from the Indian band as they wheeled and galloped in pursuit. A dozen young braves, hugging the necks of their ponies, followed him over the run. The others turned and swept by the train pouring in a hail of lead and arrows.

The charge passed, and there was si-

lence. Then two rapid shots, one behind the other like an echo, came from behind the hills. A chorus of wild yells followed, and silence deeper than before. The defenders looked at each other without a word.

Jeff stared at the rocks where Joe Dean had disappeared. They were horrible, grotesque shapes of burned red color, with streaks of yellow at their base. Again the breeze brought the brimstone smell.

Hours dragged by, and there was no rest. Always the drum of splayed, unshod hooves, circling, dashing in. The savage yells that stretched taut nerves to the breaking point. When the sun dipped into a sea of blood behind the western rim, the word sifted around. Less than half of the rifles were loaded.

"Get those cookin' fires out, get 'em out!" Parker ordered.

Jeff seized a shovel and covered the glowing coals with loose sand. It was dark when he had finished, and he stumbled among the boxes and bundles as he laid away the shovel.

He heard a whispered conference among the scouts and teamsters. As he approached, he saw a hooded lantern in the shelter of a wagon. A hat was passing among them. One of the scouts said quietly, "Don't go no further, boys, I'm it."

He showed them something he held in his hand, then shook hands with each silently. His shadow loomed against the starlight between the wagons, and he faded into the night.

Only the winking eyes of campfires around the rim revealed the presence of Indians. There was no sound except the sighing of the wind through the grass, the sleepy hum of insects, and the faraway hoot of an owl. Then out of the dark came a high, piercing scream that faded to a low gurgle. Somewhere in the dark a woman sobbed.

Jeff paced about, then sat down on a wagon tongue. Dejectedly, he dropped his head to his hands. Two men dead. The whole train trapped and defenseless—— and he was to blame.

Suddenly he noticed a spark from the smothered fire flare up in the wind, and hurried to stamp it out. Charred wood crunched beneath his heel. The breeze brought once more the smell he had noticed. Somewhere in his mind a vague memory stirred. It eluded him.

Then it came. Brimstone . . . sulphur . . . it came to him in a rush. Sulphur—— charcoal——salt-petre. He remembered a recent college chemistry experiment . . . he had been in trouble then, too. He had blown up a corner of the lab with gunpowder he had mixed in a tall glass beaker . . .

Jeff turned and faced the ring of wagons. He could get the sulphur. He had the charcoal. All he needed was salt-petre. Then he remembered. Bond! Bond had some——he had brought it along to use in curing hides.

Excitement surged through Jeff as he walked swiftly to Bond's wagon. He groped in the back and found a small bag of salt-petre and carried it to the clump of willows. He began to rake charcoal out of the dead fires. He wanted to have everything ready. Then when things quieted down he would slip out to get the sulphur. He thought of the scouts who had tried to slip through, and shivered.

It was slow work, and the pile of charcoal seemed hopelessly small. Still he scratched and scrabbled, burning his fingers on the still hof wood, keeping doggedly at it.

By midnight he had accumulated what he thought was enough. He stood up and looked around. The members of the train had settled down, but only the children slept. Between the wagons, sentries stood peering anxiously into the enveloping darkness. Every shadow might hide a skulking brave, ready to hurl a brand or loose a flaming arrow.

Jeff crept carefully around the piles of supplies that made up the inner barricade. Softly he made his way to a wagon and slipped under it. He heard shuffling feet, and hesitated, holding his breath. A few feet away was one of the sentries.

Jeff weighed the risks, and despite the chill of the night a film of moisture beaded his forehead. He hadn't told anyone of his plans. They would not believe him——

His only chance was to slip out secretly, to run a double gantlet. Sentries would shoot at any movement near the wagons. And if he evaded them, there were the Indians lurking in the shadows.

Jeff waited. The sentry turned to speak to someone, and Jeff slipped around a wagon wheel and slid into the tall grass. He dropped and froze, hugging the ground.

"What was that——?" It was the sentry's gruff voice.

"I didn't hear anythin'," the second man answered.

"I did——" the sentry was insistent, "I've got a mind to shoot——"

"Save your powder, Bill! We're goin' to need it!"

Jeff reached out and pulled himself forward, slowly, inch by inch. He felt sure that the hammering of his heart must certainly reach the listening men. He raised his head gingerly, peering ahead to catch the rugged outline of the rocks. Then he dropped down and resumed his painfully slow progress.

After what seemed an eternity of crawling he looked again. The rocks still seemed far away, but the sulphur smell was stronger. He moved more rapidly. There was a rustle in front of him. He remembered the scout, and flattened himself. Something brushed his face and he stifled a cry. But it was only a weed drifting with the wind.

AT last he felt rocks beneath his outstretched fingers, and the sulphur was strong in his nostrils. He crept closer to the trickle of seepage, felt the dried scum on the rocks. He drew his knife to scrape the flat surfaces. Then he thought——it would make too much noise. He began to dig the powdery stuff loose with his fingers and sweep it into his hat.

He paused frequently to listen. Careful as he was, it seemed that the sound of his movements echoed across the valley. He thought he heard a sound behind him, and gripped his knife with sweaty fingers. He stifled the impulse to tuck his hat under his arm and dash madly for the safety of the wagons.

Suddenly the red streak of a fire arrow arched up from the valley rim, flared and fell near the wagons. A second followed, and another.

Instantly the dry grass caught like tinder. With a start, Jeff realized that he was in the full glare of the sudden flames. Gasping, he threw himself backward, scrambling, pressing himself into a crevice in the rocks.

A wall of snapping flame was moving toward the wagons, and the canvas tops stood out starkly, reflecting the red glare. Jeff heard shouts from the defenders. He saw men leaping out with fire brands, firing the grass near the wagons. Others followed swinging wet sacks. They were back-firing.

There were savage yells behind the flames, and arrows streaked through the towering smoke. The crackle of gunfire was heavy above the roar of the fire.

The blaze leaped higher, and suddenly its flaring light reached into Jeff's hiding place. He dived for a boulder and crouched low in its shadow.

Hoof beats thudded close by. Jeff peered cautiously around the rock. Between him and the fire was an Indian on a spotted pony. The brave was so close that Jeff could see the gleam of the firelight reflect from his coppery skin and oily black hair. His ochre-smeared visage showed fierce exultation.

Jeff pressed himself to the rock. The Indian was peering intently toward the train, watching the course of the fight. If he turned he would be looking directly down on Jeff. The pony snuffled and snorted as the smoke bit his nostrils, and sidled almost up to the rock.

Jeff waited breathlessly, easing his knife out of his scabbard. Then he began to crawfish silently away from the boulder. He was edging into another shadow when the Indian whirled. For a split second Jeff stared into the glittering eyes of the savage. Death glinted from the poised buffalo lance.

Jeff leaped to his feet, and the boulder pressed hard against his back. There was no retreat. He had never fought for his life before. He had never fought——

The warrior's painted face contorted

with blood-lust and a fierce cry burst from his throat. He kicked his pony and charged down on Jeff, lance poised for the death thrust.

Jeff stood frozen, a nightmare heaviness in his limbs. Then desperation broke the grip of shock. At the last moment he dived under the driving point and heard it shatter against the boulder.

His hand closed around a sinewy ankle and he pulled hard. He felt a numbing pain as a tomahawk crashed down, glancing off his shoulder. He gritted his teeth and clung grimly. The pony reared and plunged, and the Indian fell heavily to the ground.

INSTANTLY the brave was on his feet. With a choked cry of rage he came at Jeff, tomahawk raised. Jeff caught his arm, checking the downward swing. They grappled, and Jeff went down on the rocks under his heavier foe.

Jeff clutched at the slippery, writhing torso, conscious of the heavy sour smell of the Indian. His knife arm was pinned under him, and he struggled frantically to free it.

He saw firelight glint from the poised tomahawk, and twisted desperately as it slashed down. His knife arm came free and he struck. The knife sank into the Indian's side. He raised the knife to strike again, but he felt the Indian go limp.

Slowly Jeff got to his feet and looked down at the fallen brave. The ground seemed to tilt, then right itself as the pounding blood left Jeff's head. He was panting and he was shaking.

His fingers slowly loosened and the blood-stained knife slipped to the ground. Horror of violence was strong in him, but now a fierce exultation surged through him. He had won.

Jeff was suddenly aware that the light was fading. He turned and saw that the fire had split at the fire break, swept past the wagons to roar off across the valley.

In the half light he looked toward the spring. His hat dropped in his panic, lay on the rocks, its precious contents spilled. Jeff bit his lip and goaned.

When complete darkness returned he crept back and began doggedly, painstakingly, to work. It seemed an endless effort, and his fingers were torn and aching when he stopped. He shook the hat, and felt the level of the powdery substance. Not nearly full. He looked up and checked the slow march of the stars. Time was drawing short. He still had to grind and mix before dawn. It would have to be enough.

He started the slow, painful trek back to the wagons. His aching, quivering muscles obeyed his impulses reluctantly, making stealth difficult. He came to the edge of the burn and paused. Two hundred yards of blackened ashes broken by the scattered glow of smouldering buffalo chips that sent up feathery wisps of smoke.

Two hundred yards without cover, with the rifles and arrows of the Indians behind him, and the alert eyes, the steady trigger fingers of the sentries before. He leaped to his feet and dashed forward.

As his boots spurned the hot ashes he heard scattered cries and running feet behind him. He shouted at the top of his lungs. "Don't shoot! It's me——Jeff!"

Then he sped forward and dived for the refuge of the wagons, his hat clutched desperately against him. He crawled out into the circle, and stood up. A crowd of astonished teamsters quickly gathered about him.

Parker's voice at his elbow said savagely, "What in hell's name have you been doing?"

Jeff drew a deep breath and said, "I was getting some sulphur."

"Sulphur?" Parker asked in amazemen. "What the hell for?"

Jeff hesitated. "To make some gunpowder."

Deep silence followed his words, then Parker said resignedly, "You're crazy, boy! There ain't no gunpowder on this train. We used the last ounce in that last ruckus."

Jeff gritted his teeth. "I said I was going to *make* some gunpowder."

He heard the shuffle of feet. The teamsters were leaving. They didn't believe him. They——Parker——thought he was crazy.

Jeff stood alone in the darkness. Bitterness rankled in him. He hadn't ex-

pected them to believe him——but still it hurt.

He felt a soft touch on his arm, and Nancy's voice came to him softly.

"What was it about the powder, Jeff? What were you trying to do?"

He turned to her eagerly. He could feel her standing close against him, could smell the soft fragrance of her hair. Quickly he told her of his plan.

"But, can you make it, Jeff?" Her voice was hopeful.

Jeff nodded, "I think so. I've done it before. I was using pure ingredients then and now I'm not too sure. But it's our only chance. I'll need help though."

When his voice trailed off, she said eagerly, "I'll help!"

Jeff pressed her arm gratefully. "Good!" he said. "Let's get started. We can work down by the willows——I'll fix a place where the light won't show. See if you can find some scales and something we can use for sifting."

AS the two of them moved away, Jeff could hear the bitter, taunting laughter that followed them. College boy, they'd called him. Well they might soon be glad that he *was* a college man. Or so he hoped. Failure was one factor he dared not consider . . .

Furiously they worked by the dim light of the lantern behind a shelter of canvas. A few teamsters stood watching.

Then a man squatted down beside Jeff, his face a gray blur in the gloom. "D'you really think it'll work?" he asked, hesitantly.

Jeff didn't pause in his work when he replied. "I think so. If it doesn't . . . Jeff's shrug was eloquent.

The man sat quietly a moment. Then he said, "You're right. Here, let me help."

Jeff gratefully handed over the billet of wood he was using to crush charcoal. He picked up the household scales that Nancy had brought. The formula ran through his mind. *Salt-petre, 75%; Charcoal,* 15%; *Sulphur,* 10%. He looked at the scales——not too accurate. The proportions might not be exact, but the powder would work. It would make smoke, push lead——it had to!

"That should be enough," he said, "Now get it all sifted, and I'll weigh it out—then we'll have to put out the light and mix it in the dark."

They were ringed now by figures. Voices muttered. There was a trace of hope in the voices and it occurred to him that he, alone, had become their only hope. Hope with the heavy shadow of anxiety and doubt.

"That does it," Jeff said at last. "Now douse the light." He threw a hurried, apprehensive glance at the sky. Precious moments were slipping away.

As the lantern flickered out, Jeff said, "Dump it all on this piece of buckskin. Then mix it——and mix it again! The more the better."

Willing hands fell to, and Jeff straightened, stretching aching muscles. Then, with a start, he realized that Parker was beside him. He turned and it was a very strange look that he saw on Parker's face. The contempt that had once been there was now missing.

"This had better work, Jeff," Parker said. "If it doesn't——"

Jeff's voice was flat with weariness. "If it doesn't I'll be as dead as the rest," he said.

The stars began to pale, and the blackness of the night thinned against the hills. Quiet reigned beyond the wagons but straining eyes searched the valley rim for lurking shadows.

Jeff caught the first tinge of pink in the eastern sky. "It'll have to be enough mixing," he said, "Load the guns. Quickly!"

The powder was passed around and eager, feverish fingers rammed charges home. There was a feeling of urgency as if each man sensed it would be a race against time. Jeff watched them. Hope struggled with doubt and fear in his mind. Once they had despised him for the tenderfoot he was. Once, he had failed them. But would he fail them again? If he did . . . and once again it was a thought he did not care to consider. He peered out between the wagons, trying to pierce the thinning gloom. Eery gray light was falling over the hills.

Dark blotches rose above the rim of the

valley, blotches that became figures. They increased in numbers, drew together.

The Indians came down from every side, slowly, confidently. Trotting their horses in a close-packed, unbroken line, they came. A confident, arrogant band of Indians, sensing now that the powder supply had been exhausted. They moved down the hillside, out onto the valley floor.

The whispered word passed down the line. "Hold your fire! Let them get in close! Then fire on signal!"

Jeff stood watching the fearful approaching line. Slowly they came, inexorably. Again, furtive fingers of doubt plucked at his mind. What if his gunpowder didn't work?

His eyes dropped fleetingly to the axe beside him. If worse came to worse, he wouldn't go alone.

The waiting bore down on him. Every nerve was screaming, *Shoot! Shoot now!* Jeff clutched his weapon and felt the cold beads of water trickle down his sides. He took a deep breath to calm himself, but it did not help.

Suddenly the chief swung his arm, and a pandemonium of screaming yells broke from the painted horde. Wiry ponies sprang into the desperate run of a headlong charge. Painted faces loomed close, frenzied, glittering eyes . . .

"Fire!"

THE thunderous crash of musketry rolled out as a hundred guns belched flame. A cloud of smoke billowed toward the charging line of Sioux. There was an instant of silence, dead silence. Then a shrill exultant yell rose from the defenders.

"By Gad, Jeff Lane, you done it!" A burly teamster near Jeff shook his rifle triumphantly over his head. And Jeff Lane, his right shoulder numb from the musket kick, closed his eyes and let the feeling of accomplishment surge up within him. Then, quickly, Jeff shoved the pleasant thoughts from his mind for he was busy again.

Wild yells ripped from savage throats, yells on a different note. Surprise and pain, and fear, as clearing smoke revealed a broken tangle of horses and men. The ground was littered with twisted forms. The teamsters seized spare weapons and another volley rattled into the welter of plunging horses and struggling men. The attackers broke and scattered in wild, disorganized confusion.

The faces of the defenders gleamed with grim satisfaction as they reloaded. Jeff tamped home a powder charge, then sank weakly against a wagon wheel.

The Indians reformed and came in again. Their yells were fierce with rage, but the spirit was gone. A few rained arrows and bullets against the wagons, while others leaned low to snatch up the dead and wounded.

Another volley from the wagons smashed into them, and more riderless ponies fled across the plain. The chief lay stretched on the torn sod, his war-bonnet crumpled.

Relief, then joy swept the train and Jeff was surrounded by shouting teamsters, who pounded his shoulders and cheered hoarsely.

Parker stepped up to him and gripped his shoulder with strong fingers. There was a trace of a crooked grin on Parker's face.

"Son," Parker said. "I reckon maybe they don't teach you how to drive mules in them eastern colleges. But the things they do teach could come in handy. Even here in the west!" Parker winked at Nancy and Jeff did not miss the look. Then Parker turned and became the wagon leader again. Gruffly, he said, "All right men, let's get hitched up and rollin'! "Them injuns won't be pesterin' us before we get to Chimney Rock. From there on the cavalry will take care of 'em. Come on! Get them mules lined out——we ain't got all day!"

Nancy Parker looked at Jeff and her eyes were shining. "For a tenderfoot," she teased, "you seem to be doing all right. I'm happy, Jeff."

Jeff answered her smile. There would be time. There would be time for talk later. Right now he had to help with the damndest, peskiest team of mules in all the west.

RENEGADES FROM TEXAS

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

ALL DURING THE FORTY-DAY patrol, on which Company K of the Frontier Battalion swung a wide loop around the wild and lonely prairie between the San Sabar and the upper Brazos, Ranger Sebe Burton had had more than Comanches on his mind. But that was understandable. Sebe was a young man, and in love. He had proposed to the girl before the outfit left its camp on the San Saba, and she had promised him her answer on his return.

Sebe's pulse was stampeding, for now he was headed for the Carmody ranch. Company K was extending the loop a little farther to take in the Carmody ranch on Spanish Man's Creek. There had been a sly glint in Captain Hayden's eyes when he said, "Sebe, we'll swing south to make

Maugher fired point-blank.

sure the Carmody ranch is all right. And maybe get invited to a woman-cooked meal."

Hayden had really meant was, "We'll give you a chance to see Maria."

The entire company knew that Sebe was courting old Matthew Carmody's daughter. Every man was eager to know what her answer would be. There was even some betting. Sebe hadn't been able to hide the fact that though Maria smiled upon him and no other man, Old Matt didn't wholly approve. Maria's answer could be influenced by her domineering father.

Sebe put his dun horse up a cactus-studded rise. Being the company's scout, he rode well in the lead. The top of the knob, where he reined in, looked out across the valley of Spanish Man's Creek. Matthew Carmody's range. It was a small part of an old Spanish Crown land grant, which Carmody had come into as a young man by marrying into the ancient Hernandez family. Time had whittled down his domain, because of an inability to prove up his claims, and this valley was all that he had left . . . . Looking out over the range, Sebe's eyes were jolted. The expected grin faded from his young face.

Not so far as he could see was there a single cow critter.

Nor any of Carmody's vaqueros.

NO SMOKE CURLED from the big adobe ranchhouse or from any of the nearby Mexican huts. No dusky women or half-naked kids could be seen about the 'dobes. Over by the big barn, the corrals were empty of horses. Sebe's shock kept him motionless for perhaps a full minute, then he lifted his right arm high and turned his horse in a fast, tight circle —the signal that would tell the company, still a half mile away, that there was trouble. Then Sebe rode down the south side of the rise.

He thought in panic, *Comanches*? But instantly he knew that an Indian raid wouldn't have so completely stripped such a big ranch. Old Matt Carmody was a soldier and a frontiersman from 'way back, from Jim Bowie and Alamo days, and his vaqueros were good fighting men. They would have fought savagely, and certainly there would be survivors. Comancheees, for all their thieving of Texas cattle, couldn't have run off the whole Carmody herd within a short period of forty days . . *What did happen then?* Sebe asked himself.

He rode through the little Mexican village, and it reminded him of a graveyard. On a rack by one 'dobe, he saw bunches of peppers drying in the sunlight. Beyond that, there was no sign that the huts had ever been occupied. Not even a stray cur remained. Sebe jogged past the silent barn, the empty corrals, swung to the main *casa* over by the creek where the cottonwoods grew tall. The house had been built in Spanish days. Its yellowed walls, only here and there showing signs of a faded coat of whitewash, were older than any living man. It had iron-grilled windows and a huge iron-banded door. Something that fluttered slightly in the breeze was fastened, by a knife, to the door.

It was sheet of old parchment, pinned there by a bowie knife.

Sebe rode close, leaned forward to read the crudely lettered message on the parchment. Without a doubt, it had been written with a .45 lead slug. The words were far less clear than if written in ink. Sebe read:

NOTICE!

To all concerned—I am leaving Texas, and I've guns enough to blast a way out. Anybody trying to stop me will do so at his own risk.

Signed, MATHEW CARMODY.

Sebe's bewilderment grew when he read the sign. Why should Matthew Carmody leave Texas?

The old rancher had been a Texan from the days before Texas had been even a republic. At sixty-five, he had gone off as a soldier to fight for Texas and the Confederacy—returning only six months ago with one arm missing and a bullet-shattered left leg. True, Sebe had heard the old man express a disgust for Texas and some of its people after his return. He had found dissension among the people, for not all Texas men were secessionists.

He had also found many men who

hadn't seen fit to don the uniform. Instead they had made themselves rich at the expense of those who had gone off to war. Cattle were dirt cheap in Texas now, but certain men, with an eye for the future, were busy on every range with long rope and running iron. Matthew Carmody had returned after two years of soldiering to find his herd shrunk from seven thousand to one-third that number—and young stock bearing brands that were new to the frontier.

That was it! Carmody's disgust had been so great that it had driven him from the land. But where had he gone? The question hammered Sebe's mind. For where Matthew Carmody had gone, so had Maria!

The rangers came up to the ranch headquarters, riding horses that were dead-beat from the long patrol. The men were gaunt-faced, bewhiskered. But their eyes were not too tired to show surprise. Company K's camp was within seven miles of here, and often the rangers had come to the ranch for meals that were really feasts and for fiestas in the little village. Burly Capt. Sam Hayden said, "Sebe, what's all this?"

Sebe pointed to the message on the door.

Hayden read it, his face darkening with a scowl. He was a man who believed in the authority he represented, that of the Governor of Texas. It was his duty to enforce the restrictions necessary in wartime, one of which was that no man might leave the State without permission, as well as guard the frontier. Now, with an oath, Hayden tore down the parchment and examined its reverse side. "It's a grant from the Spanish Crown to the Hernandez family," he said angrily. "He left it behind to show that he's gone for good!"

Sebe nodded, the shocked look still on his face.

"He knew we'd follow him, turn him back," Hayden went on. "So he left this warning. But dammit; he can't have left Texas yet!"

"You're going to go after him, sir?" Sebe asked.

"I am, just as soon as we find fresh mounts," Hayden retorted. "This makes Matt Carmody a fugitive!"

COMPANY K reached its camp on the San Saba at sundown. It had a couple of log cabins, a few tents, and some lean-tos for shelter. It was enclosed by a low stockade of oaken posts. Hayden immediately sent the men on guard there out to obtain fresh mounts from some nearby ranches. He had his sergeants check provisions and ammunition. His anger was increasing and it showed plainly in his face.

Sebe Burton understood Hayden's determination to stop Matthew Carmody. Those two powerful men had never really hit it off. Carmody was from Virginia originally, and Hayden from Ohio. They were at odds, politically. Carmody had gone to fight for his beliefs, but Sam Hayden, like many other of Texas' adopted sons, including young Sebe Burton, had preferred to defend the frontier. They loved Texas and would not bear arms against it, but neither would they take up arms against the Union. It was their privilege, granted by the State of Texas. Many men like Sam Hayden and Sebe Burton wore no uniform, yet faced violent death time after time.

But Sebe could not find anger in himself for Matthew Carmody. The old man had fought and bled for Texas, and it seemed that he had won the right to leave—restrictions of war or not. But Sam Hayden was blind to Carmody's war record. He saw the older man only as a fugitive, for the ranger captain believed in the very letter of the law. He would lead the company against Mathew Carmody, and the Carmody outfit would fight. Texans would kill each other senselessly. Suddenly Sebe Burton knew that he had to do his best to avoid bloodshed.

He strode to the log cabin that was Captain Hayden's headquarters. He knocked on the door, entered. Hayden sat at the crude plank table that served him as a desk. He was writing a report for the Governor.

Looking up, the angry frown was still on his heavy face.

"Well, what is it?"

"Sir," said Sebe, saluting, "I'd like permission to go after Matthew Carmody—alone."

II

SAM HAYDEN'S FACE could be stern, and anger could swell the ropy veins at his temples. His eyes could take on a chill glint that would freeze a man's courage. But young Sebe Burton stood firm, and finally the basic fairness of the ranger captain showed itself.

"I understand how you feel, son," Hayden said. "But I don't savvy how you can handle Matt Carmody. He's tough as a Brazos 'gator."

"He's a man of honor, sir."

"It's not honorable to run away when Texas is in trouble."

"Carmody should be reminded of that," Sebe said. "And with your permission, sir, I'll remind him," said Sebe, his eyes suddenly blazing.

Hayden rose from his desk, paced the floor, frowning in thought. Finally he said, "You have permission. Your only orders are to attempt to reason with Carmody. But . . ." his voice hardened again—"I want him and his outfit back in Spanish Man's Valley. I've little hope that you'll succeed, so I'll follow you with the company—and take stern measures, if you fail."

Sebe said, "Thank you, sir," saluted, turned to the door.

Hayden called, "One moment," and turned to a map on the wall behind his desk. It was the product of Army surveyors, made before the outbreak of war. Hayden said, "Carmody could only travel west or south—to New Mexico or Old Mexico, Which way do you figure he's headed?"

"South, sir."

"Your reason?"

"Some of the Hernandez family still live in Chihuahua," Sebe replied. "I once heard Old Matt mention a brother-in-law, Don Felipe Hernandez, who has a big rancho below the border."

Hayden nodded. "It seems likely," he said. "Good luck to you, Sebe."

Sebe Burton again said, "Thank you, sir," saluted and turned to the door.

Sebe rode out at dawn, striking south for the Carmody ranch. He traveled light, in the fashion of the Frontier Battalion—his bedroll, tincup and skillet, and a small sack of provisions tied to his saddle.

His supplies consisted only of salt, flour and tea. The rangers, like all Texans, were on short rations these days. It was their custom to live off the land—when there was game to be shot, or wild cattle. Sebe knew of one iron-stomached ranger who had once warded off starvation by eating rattlesnake meat. Coming into the valley, Sebe made sure that it wasn't just a nightmare, that the Carmody ranch really was abandoned—and that Maria was gone.

He wondered if she hadn't left some message for him within the *casa,* but entering the ranchhouse without invitation would have seemed like trespassing. Sebe didn't stop. His heart ached a little as he rode past the deserted ranch headquarters, and put his dun horse along the unmarked trail ahead.

He nooned at the Llano, struck out across the empty country to the south. There was no trace of the Carmody outfit. Dust storms had obliterated the tracks of cattle, horses, and wagons. . . . Sebe was mixed up in his thoughts as he rode along hour after hour. Sometimes he hoped that Carmody had start enough to gain Mexico, so that the proud old man wouldn't have to bow to authority.

At other times, Sebe feared that the outfit couldn't be overtaken—that it would reach the border, and Maria would be lost to him. After all, she had not given him her answer. She was not promised to him, so he could not be sure that she would wait until that far off and still unforeseen day when the war was over and he could leave Texas to again court her.

There was that Steve Randall who had returned from the war with Matthew Carmody, the son of an old friend of Carmody's from Virginia. A handsome, dudish sort, Randall had served in the same company with Carmody. Both men had been wounded in the same battle, discharged from the same hospital on the same day. Though Randall appeared sound now, he had been given a discharge from the army because of his wounds. His reason for accompanying Carmody to Texas was his own, but it was a certainty that the old man looked upon him with favor—

perhaps as a prospective son-in-law. No! Sebe Burton did not want the Carmody outfit to reach Mexico. At least, not before he saw Maria again.

He reached the dry bed of the upper Guadalupe that afternoon, and ran into some Mexicans bound for San Antonio. They had spare horses, and were willing to make a trade for Sebe's dun, now trail-worn, when he offered five silver dollars to boot. Freshly mounted, he struck out at a lope for the Eagle Pass road. He'd questioned the Mexicans. They hadn't seen the Carmody outfit.

The Eagle Pass road was a full thirty miles, and darkness had come before Sebe reached it. But then he saw campfires in the distance, and shortly came to a wagon train in night camp. It was a freighting outfit hauling supplies out of Mexico to San Antonio, for shipment from there to the Confederate Army. Sorely needed supplies. Sebe dismounted, told the outfit's boss that he was a ranger of the Frontier Batalion, and asked if he had seen the Carmody outfit.

"It didn't pass this way," the freighter said. "Any outfit trying to get cattle out of the state wouldn't risk heading for the border jump at the Pass. Carmody's sure to be heading for a crossing between here and the Pecos."

"He'd be trailing through the malpais, that way."

"His only choice, friend, with you rangers after him."

Sebe nodded and then headed out through the darkness, astride a big roan gelding he'd gotten from the Mexicans.

THE VILLAGE was called Rosario. Dogs barked at Sebe as he rode his roan in at mid-day. A goat tied by one hut gazed solemnly at him. Some youngsters yelped at him. There was a combination store and cantina, with the owner lounging fatly in its doorway.

Sebe stripped his horse, and rubbed it down in the shade at one side of the cantina. Then the proprietor had his buxom wife serve him a meal of tortillas, beans and cool wine. It was this fat man, Sanches, who also had word of the Carmody outfit.

Sebe had some Spanish, Sanchez some English. They managed to make themselves understood, and Sanchez said, "I did not see it, myself, Senor. But a rider, a nephew of mine named Pablo, returned yesterday from a trip. He talked to some horse-hunters on the way. They told him of seeing a big herd, many riders, and five wagons traveling *El Camino de Contrabandistas.*"

"Smugglers' Trail?"

"Si, Senor."

"How far from here is this trail?"

"Far, *amigo.* Perhaps forty miles," said Sanchez, pointing west. "It is a bad one . . ."

Sanchez went on to explain that the trail was used in the old days, when he was a mere boy, by men who did not want to pay the tax levied by the various Mexican governors upon trade goods. His nephew Pablo, who was already gone on some mysterious business of his own, had said only yesterday that many herds had recently come over the trail. But Pablo had hinted darkly that the men driving the cattle did not cross the Rio Grande with their herds. The cattle reached Mexico, all right, but their real owners did not.

"Why's that?" Sebe demanded.

"I only know what my nephew says, Senor," said Sanchez. "Pablo, he says that there is a band of *ladrones* that raid the herds. Some of the band are outlaws of my own people, others are of yours, Senor. They call themselves the Border Thieves. So Pablo tells me"

Sebe did not know whether to believe all this or not.

But it was clear that the fat Sanchez believed it.

Sebe said, "I'm going to find this outfit on Smugglers' Trail, amigo. I want to turn it back, if I can. But I may need help. Is there a man in the village who'd ride north with a message for the Frontier Battalion?"

He reached into his pocket, brought out what little money he had left. It was very little, for the State of Texas still had to pay its rangers. He lay a ten-dollar goldpiece and five silver dollars on the counter. "I'll write out the mes-

sage," he said. "I want it to be delivered to Captain Sam Hayden of Company K, and he can be found somewhere south of the San Saba. What do you say, Sanchez?"

"I have another nephew, Senor," said the storekeeper.

III

THE NEPHEW'S NAME was Mateo, and he was a bright youth of seventeen. He owned a mule that was broken to the sadle, and, *si, Senor,* he had already been as far north as the San Saba. He would find *Capitan* Hayden and his rangers, surely. . . . He pocketed the message Sebe wrote, mounted his mule, and set out across the sandy waste of prickly pear and Spanish dagger at a hard run.

There were no horses in the village, so Sebe could make no trade. He had to give his roan a rest, and so settled himself in a corner of Sanchez's store to sleep. Late in the afternoon, he got a pail of water from the well and his English razor from his saddle bag. He must have been convinced, as he washed up and shaved the golden down from his cheeks, that he would soon see Maria. . . .

Forty miles, Sanches had said.

Sebe rode all that night, and certainly covered that many miles by the time the brassy sun rose in the east. But he saw no trail. There was only emptiness—sand, rocks, thorny brush, cactus. And wind. The dust billowed up in huge clouds that glittered blindingly white in the sunglare. But there was no trail.

Sebe realized that it would be no distinct trace, for the wind-shifted sand would wipe out the marks of the few men and animals that came this way. He halted in the scant shade of some rocks, off-saddled, put the roan on picket line. He poured some of the water from his canteen into his hat, and let his horse drink.

There was no way of knowing whether the Carmody outfit had passed this spot, or had still to come this way—whether he should turn north or south. He wasn't even sure that this spot was within half a dozen miles of where the outfit had passed or would pass. An hour passed before Sebe, scanning the distances, saw vultures wheeling against the pale sky several miles to the west.

It was easier, now. There was a trail, at last.

It was a trail of dead and dying cattle —MC branded cattle. Within five miles, Sebe Burton counted forty head. They had fallen victims of thirst. The desert was taking its toll.

There were marks to follow, too. Hoof marks and wagon tracks. Busy though the wind was, it hadn't had time to obliterate the trace. The Carmody outfit wasn't far ahead. Sebe rode steadily but no longer pushed his mount. He had time. He needed time, to think of what to say to the hot-tempered Matthew Carmody.

He sighted the outfit when the sun was highest, then urged his horse on at an easy lope. Overtaking the outfit, he saw how the vaqueros fought with the great herd to keep it moving. Even then a couple of critters were left behind, too weak to be driven farther. The five wagons were well ahead, followed by the *remuda.*

Dust shrouded the outfit. The bawling of the cattle was mournful. The shouts of the vaqueros rang hollowly.

Sebe rode by the plodding herd, waving to the vaqueros who stared at him blankly. He found Matthew Carmody riding well ahead of the cattle, his empty left sleeve hanging limp. The rancher's iron-gray head was bowed, his square chin resting against his chest. Dust lay thick upon his broad-brimmed hat and upon the shoulders of his black broadcloth coat. His shaggy mustache masked whatever expression lay upon his lips, and his eyes stared vacantly. He looked up with a start as Sebe swung close alongside, but recognition was slow in coming to his eyes.

"It's no use, sir," Sebe said bluntly. "You'll never get your cattle through to Mexico. You're still a hundred miles from the Rio Grande. Your herd can't wait that long for water. If you swing east, you've a chance of saving some of your stock. There's water—a well and

a creek—at Rosario. It's more than forty miles, but——"

"My outfit will never turn aside," Carmody said flatly.

"Then you'll throw away your cattle—as you did your honor!"

"What? What's that?"

"That's it, Matt," Sebe said. "It's a matter of honor. You're on the run. You're running from Texas because now it's not to your liking. All these years Texas fed and sheltered you. It gave you more than it gave most men. But now——"

An oath rumbled from the old man's chest. "You young squirt, I ought to make you eat your words!" he raged. "I went off and fought for this land. I lost my arm, and I'm crippled in my left leg. While I lay bleeding, Texas men—men I'd called friends and neighbors—put their brands on my cattle. They stole my crop of calves during the past two years, and when my vaqueros protested they were gun-whipped."

His voice rose until it was a shout, drawing two riders and a wagon from up ahead. One of the approaching riders was Steve Randall, the other a man Sebe did not know. The wagon was driven by a Mexican woman, but Maria Carmody was on the seat with her.

Carmody bellowed. "These same men, the ones that turned thieves, now preach that the war is senseless—that there's got to be peace. Lord! You talk of honor!"

THE OTHERS DREW close, and Randall said, "Hello, Burton! Where did you drop from?" His face was gaunt, dark with a stubble of beard. He no longer looked the dandified Virginia gentleman. The man who rode with him was thick-bodied. He had an ugly scar and a scattering of pock marks across his face. His nose was misshapen. Sebe remembered him from somewhere——

Maria cried, "Sebe!"

She climbed down from the wagon as it came to a stop, a tall girl of twenty—and the sight of her thinned down face and dark shadowed eyes made Sebe wince. Maria had inherited her Spanish mother's beauty, but this madman's trek across the malpais was robbing her of it. But Sebe loved her for more than her beauty; he'd lost his heart to her because she was a good companion, full of gaiety. And now she was subdued.

Even her show of pleasure faded as she came forward.

"You didn't bring the rangers, Sebe?"

"They're on the way," he told her. "I came alone. Captain Hayden gave me permission to try to reason with your father." He hardened his voice. "He won't listen to reason," he went on. "He should have known that Hayden would come after him. He has orders——"

"Orders, be damned!" Matthew Carmody broke in. "Hayden's not half the Texan I am—and never will be. I left a warning for him, and I swear my crew will fight if any man gets in our way!"

"You've got more to fear than the rangers," Sebe told him. "I've talked to the Mexicans at Rosario. Other men have brought herds down this trail during the war, but they never lived to cross into Mexico. They were jumped by a band of border outlaws and killed. The renegades were the ones that got what cattle were left alive after coming down this trail. That's what you've go to fear!"

Matt Carmody snorted, "Talk!"

Steve Randall said, "Perhaps it's straight talk, sir."

The man with the battered face swung his horse alongside Sebe. He said flatly, "I led an outfit down Smugglers' Trail last year. We didn't meet up with any outlaws. Those Mexes spun you a yarn, stranger. We wouldn't have had any trouble if the drought hadn't dried up the water holes. And nobody's to blame for that."

Sebe stared at him. He remembered the man as Russ Maugher. Back in '61, Sebe had been with an outfit trailing cattle to Missouri. Two hundred head had been in his own brand. The herd had been jumped by a band of Jayhawkers at the Missouri line—and stampeded. Several hundred were never recovered, among them thirty-seven of Sebe's steers. There had been shooting, and Sebe had fired at this Maugher. He'd learned the man's name from a Jayhawker who was wounded

and captured. Russ Maugher had led the raiders.

"You, what are you doing with this outfit " Sebe demanded.

"Carmody's paying me to guide him through to Mexico," Maugher said. There was a stirring of memory in his yellowish eyes. "I'm no fool, mister. I wouldn't risk my hide for a few dollars, if there were border outlaws waiting to jump us."

"Not unless you were in with them."

"Why, damn you——"

"Keep out of this, Maugher," Sebe said flatly. He looked at Steve Randall, whom he took for a reasonable man, and at Maria, who certainly couldn't want to go farther along this death trail. "I've orders to try to reason with you people," he said. "But I'm going farther than that. I'm sorry, Maria."

Maria looked at him with widened eyes, and moved closer to Randall.

Sebe looked at Matthew Carmody again. "Matthew, he said, "consider yourself a prisoner of the Frontier Battalion. I'm placing you under arrest."

Carmody choked on his quick rage.

Russ Maugher swore, and took over.

He was on Sebe's left side. With one smooth movement, he drew his pistol and struck Sebe at the base of the skull.

IV

SEBE drew his own gun while pain still clamped his brain. The first blow had him half blinded and reeling, and Maugher hit him a second and a third time. Sebe heard Maria scream. He heard Steve Randall utter a protest, and Old Matt Carmody grunt, "Maugher, that's enough!" Then he hit the ground, after pitching head first off his horse. But those crashing blows didn't rob him of all consciousness . . . He knew that Maugher and Steve Randall picked him up and placed him in a wagon—that the wagon got underway again.

It was Maria's wagon.

Some of the cluttered freight was her belongings, some was household gear. Sebe lay wedged between a huge trunk and a rocking-chair. He groaned, pulled himself up, sat with his back to the trunk. He held his head in his hands. It ached and throbbed. The sun beating against the sheeting overhead made the wagon an oven. Sebe knew that he was a prisoner, even though they hadn't tied him up. Just taking away his gun and his horse was guarantee against his escaping.

Maria came back through the wagon with a dipper of water. She knelt beside him, whispering, "Oh, Sebe—Sebe!" He reached out, touched her shoulder, told her he was all right.

"You want to go to Mexico, Maria?" he asked.

"No, Sebe. But I must do as my father says."

"And Steve Randall?"

"He doesn't know this country," Maria replied. "He thinks Dad is doing right. He doesn't trust Russ Maugher, since you told us about those border outlaws. We've been on the trail for more than two weeks now, and every day gets worse."

"How come Matthew took up with Maugher?"

"He came to the ranch just after you went out on patrol with the rangers," Maria said. "He told Dad that there was a market for Texas cattle in Mexico and that he'd helped Sam Parson and some other men we knew to take herds across the border. Since there's no other market for Texas cattle, Dad was taken in. But instead of just taking a herd south, Dad decided to move to Mexico and settle there. He plans to buy land from my uncle, Don Felipe Hernandez."

"He'll never get there,," Sebe said. "I'm sure Maugher is working with the border outlaws. He's a sneaky one. He baits Texas ranchers with offers of a Mexican sale for their cattle—and so tolls them right into the hands of the renegades. And if this outfit is ambushed, they'll get more loot than cattle. All the stuff in these wagons———"

"And Dad has a chest of money here in this wagon," Maria said. "It's all his savings. Russ Maugher saw it loaded. Sebe, what are we going to do? There's no use trying to change Dad's mind!"

"I'm going to escape tonight, Maria."

"Maugher will watch. He'll kill you!"

"Get me a gun," Sebe said. "Steve

Randall's armed. Maybe you can get his gun."

Maria shook her head. "Steve would do most anything for me, but not that. He wouldn't go against my father. And that's how your escape would seem to him. But I'll get you a gun—somehow, Sebe!"

"If I get away and bring the rangers," Sebe went on, "will the vaqueros fight against them?"

"If Matthew Carmody tells them to, yes."

Sebe frowned. He had followed the outfit in the hope of avoiding bloodshed between Carmody and his vaqueros and Captain Sam Hayden's men. He still wanted to avoid that, yet he couldn't allow these people to head into a renegade ambush that would give them no chance to fight back. Suddenly he had an idea. There were at least a dozen women with the wagons, besides twice that many children. The four rigs ahead were swarming with dusky-skinned people. They were the families of the Carmody vaqueros. Sebe caught tight hold of Maria's arm.

"Tonight, when camp is made," he told her, "you talk to the women. Tell them that they must influence their men—keep them from obeying Matthew Carmody's orders to fight when the rangers come!"

"Oh, Sebe," Maria cried. "How can I go against my own father?"

"It's your life, Maria. The lives of all these people," Sebe said. "Even if there should be no ambush at the border, some of them may die along the trail. It's still a long way to Chihuahua!"

"Maugher says we'll reach water by sundown."

"Damn Maugher!" Sebe muttered. "You do as I say, Maria."

THEY DID CAMP by water that sundown, just as Maugher had promised. It was a huge tank. The vaqueros kept the cattle upwind from it until the remuda was watered and the water barrels lashed to the wagons were refilled. Then the herd stampeded toward the tank. More than two thousand thirsty cattle fought to get at the water. The tank was drained to its muddy bottom, but more water oozed in from a subterranean source . . . And Russ Maugher boasted, "I'm a man of my word. We'll get through all right!"

Brush was gathered, fires built, and the women cooked the evening meal. Steve Randall started a campfire off to one side, and old Matthew Carmody sat down by it. Carmody huddled by the blaze, though the wind was not chill. He looked oddly frail to Sebe Burton. He'd aged during his soldiering. And the great will of the man who, for thirty years, had helped in the making of Texas? Sebe knew that it was bent, if not broken. Russ Maugher there, swaggering up to Carmody's fire, was now the real boss of the outfit.

Sebe swore under his breath.

Sebe was out of the wagon now, lounging against one of its high rear wheels. A vaquero stood nearby with a rifle, placed there on guard by Maugher . . . Darkness closed in as the meal was dished out. Maria brought Sebe a plate of food and a tincup of coffee. She now wore an apron over her gingham dress. "Sebe, I've a gun," she said, handing him his meal. "It's on the wagon seat."

He nodded, drank some of the hot coffee.

Maria went on, whispering, "I've talked to one of the vaqueros. He'll have a fresh horse saddled and waiting, on the far side of the remuda." Her voice broke. "My father will hate me for this, Sebe," she said chokingly. "But I trust you. I think you're right."

"I'll head for that Mexican village—Rosario," Sebe told her. "If Captain Hayden got my message, he'll come that way. It's a long ride—more than forty miles from here—but I'll make it by sun-up. If I don't get away, though, you try to send that vaquero you can trust. Tell him to head straight east until he sees two buttes close together, the only ones in that direction. Rosario is just north of the rocks."

Maria nodded, gazed at him worriedly, then turned away.

Sebe spoke her name, low-voiced, calling her back.

He said, "You remember that question I asked you before all this happened?"

"Yes, Sebe, I remember," Maria replied, her eyes downcast. "But I'm still not ready to answer. I don't want to say 'no,' but——"

"But there's Steve Randall. Is that it?"

"He's asked me to marry him, too, Sebe."

"And you haven't made up your mind."

"I have made up my mind," Maria said, huskily. "I—I must go."

She hurried away, leaving Sebe more bewildered than he had ever been in his life. She had made up her mind about which of them she wished to marry, yet she didn't want to say "no" or "yes" to him. There was no understanding women. He hurried his meal.

Later, Sebe worked his way over to the cluttered freight in the wagon. He emerged from under the canvas top and felt about the seat for the gun. It wasn't there.

"Looking for this, Ranger?"

Russ Maugher stood by the wagon, on off side from the camp, and his ugly face showed a mocking grin. He held a six-shooter in his hand.

"I saw the girl get it from one of the Mex riders," Maugher said. "Maybe I should have let you get it—so I'd have an excuse for killing you."

Sebe yelled, "Go ahead and shoot, damn you!" And launched himself off the wagon seat in a head-first dive. He crashed down upon Maugher before the man had a chance to move. And they went down fighting, hitting the ground in a tangled heap.

V

SEBE DROVE two blows to Maugher's face, and heard the man's grunt of pain turn into a howl of rage. Maugher jammed his knee into Sebe's stomach. Sebe bent suddenly double, the breath driven from him. He fell away from Maugher, gasping. He heard shouts, and running boots. In a blur he saw Russ Maugher get to his feet. The gun in Maugher's fist pointed at him.

Sebe heaved himself over in a desperate rolling lunge just as Maugher fired. Sebe felt the hot sting of powder flame, but the slug missed him. He got his arms about Maugher's legs. He heaved upward, lifting, spilling the man over backwards.

Flat on his back, Maugher tried to fire again.

Sebe kicked Maugher in the face. The next instant he was seized from behind, his arms pinned behind him—each held by a vaquero. Most of the camp crowded up. Steve Randall arrived and took the gun from Maugher.

Matthew Carmody came limping forward. "What's going on here?"

"This son was trying to escape!" Maugher growled. "Your daughter got a gun for him, and he tried to kill me when I took it away from him!"

Carmody said, "Maria?" and shot his angry gaze about. He lifted his voice, "Maria!" When there was no reply, he said, "Steve, find her!"

Randall started away, then abruptly halted.

There was a pounding of hoofs. A rider swung away from the rope corral that held the remuda, galloped past the far side of the camp. Startled cries came from the Mexican women and children, and Carmody bellowed his daughter's name. Russ Maugher swore, muttered, "She's going after those rangers! This sneaky son put her up to it!"

"I didn't——" Sebe began.

Maugher stepped over and hit him. It was a savage blow to the face. Sebe's head rocked back, his knees buckled. He would have fallen had not the men gripping his arms supported him. Maugher swung away, saying, "I'll bring her back!"

"No," said Steve Randall. "I'll go after her."

He still had the gun in his hand, and the look on his face showed that he would use it if Maugher didn't agree to his going.

Then Matthew Carmody said, "You go, Steve. And bring her back!"

The vaqueros tied Steve up—bound him hand and foot, on Russ Maugher's orders. But it was Matthew Carmody who placed a guard over him. The old man said, "Nobody's to come near him. Not even

Russ Maugher. You understand?"

The vaquero nodded, and replied, *"Si, El Jefe!"*

Sebe was left on the ground by the wagon, and given no blanket. But he had no thought of sleeping. He was afraid that if he slept, Maugher might approach despite the guard. He knew that the man now hated him enough to kill him. But he had another reason for remaining awake. As the camp quieted down for the night, Sebe listened for the sounds of riders. He feared that Steve Randall would overtake Maria and force her to return. On the other hand, he had hope that the girl would make good her escape. He knew that Maria could ride like a vaquero.

The hours passed.

Dawn came and the camp was aroused, but Maria and Steve Randall didn't return. Hope was strong in Sebe Burton. He was sure that the girl had reached Rosario. Now if Captain Hayden and his Company K had gotten that far . . . Sebe refused to think that hadn't happened. He knew that Sam Hayden was a man of iron will. Hayden never turned back once he was started on a trail.

Matthew Carmody and Russ Maugher rode out shortly afterward. The women broke camp, hitched up the wagon teams. Another guard, a youth of about fifteen, replaced Sebe's night guard. He removed Sebe's bonds, ordered him into the wagon. When the wagons got under way, the youth rode behind on a pinto pony with a rifle across his saddle. Sebe rode the tailgate, and peered out across the sandy wastes. He saw no signs of riders. Steven Randall *wasn't* bringing Maria back.

The outfit nooned five miles south of the location of their night camp, and the cattle passed while a meal was eaten. The trail-hands spelled each other to eat. Matt Carmody came in only for coffee, which he drank scalding hot. His face looked grayer, more aged than yesterday. He kept staring out across the desert, toward the northeast.

Sebe started toward Carmody, but his guard headed him off.

"Matt, where's Maugher?" Sebe called out. "He didn't come in with you."

Carmody gave him a blank stare, said, "He's scouting ahead of the herd—looking for water and a bed ground." He handed his empty cup to a woman, turned to his horse. With one arm missing and a game leg, he had some trouble mounting. Then he turned his horse toward Sebe, and his voice was ugly. "If anything has happened to my daughter," he muttered, "I'll kill you. So help me, I'll shoot you down like a dog!"

He turned away, and rode hard after the herd.

SEBE rode the tailgate of the last wagon once more, under the eyes of the Mexican boy. But they were less watchful, those young eyes. Once during the afternoon, the boy, whose name was Mateo, fired his rifle at a rattlesnake that lay in the shade of a rock. It was a poor shot, and the snake slithered away before a second shot could be fired.

The boy grew restless in the saddle, as the hours of heat dragged on. His face beneath the broad brim of his straw sombrero grew glum. The sun dropped finally toward the desert's western rim. And all this while, Sebe noted, Russ Maugher did not return from his scout for water. To the south jagged rock hills loomed. In an hour, it would be time to make camp—water or no water. And Sebe thought, *Now! It's got to be now!*

He gave a yelp, pointed to a clump of cactus.

"El culebra! he cried. "A snake!"

Mateo reined in, swung his rifle toward the cactus. Sebe dropped from the wagon and lunged forward before the boy realized that he had been fooled. Sebe caught him about the body, pulled him from the pony. Mateo cried out, struggled savagely, but Sebe flung him to the ground. Sebe wrenched the rifle from the boy's hand, then caught up the pinto.

"Now you can ride the wagon," he said, and swung to the saddle.

He meant to find out what Russ Maugher was up to, while there was still time.

VI

SEBE SWUNG PAST the wagons, and and ran the pinto for perhaps a mile. Looking back, he saw no pursuit. If Mateo had told Matthew Carmody of the prisoner's escape, it seemed that the old rancher no longer considered it important to hold Sebe. Cutting for sign, Sebe soon found the hoof marks of Russ Maugher's horse. The man had traveled south, toward those bleak rock hills.

The hills were farther away than Sebe had figured. As the sun disappeared, he was still several miles from them. He studied the eroded slopes, now splashed with livid hues by the setting sun, and saw that the range was honeycombed with gorges.

Maugher's trail led straight toward a narrow gap. Dusk thickened, darkness came, and Maugher's tracks were lost. Blackness shrouded the jagged uplifts, and Sebe, riding deep into them, felt like a blind man in a maze. He halted finally, resting his horse before turning it back, and caught some distant sound.

He drew the rifle from its saddle boot, thinking *Maugher!* Uneasiness gripped him. Maugher was armed with rifle and six-shooter, while Sebe's rifle was a single-shot Spencer. Sebe knew his chances would be slim if it came to a shoot-out. But the sound in the night now became distinct. It was the sound of many riders!

A band of men was riding through the rock hills. Sebe could hear hoofs striking rock. He heard voices muttering, laughing guardedly. He didn't wait to see how many horsemen there were, but turned and fled. It took him perhaps an hour to find his way out of the hills, then he lifted the pinto into a hard lope. The trail camp was still half a dozen miles across the desert flats.

Three campfires glowed in the darkness. The herd was a huge black patch off to the right. The cattle were bawling and, instead of bedding down, kept moving about. Thirst had them restless again. Half a dozen vaqueros were wearily circling the herd. In the camp, the rest of the crew slept by their saddle mounts, ready to mount up should the suffering cattle break in wild stampede.

Sebe swung down from his blowing horse, strode toward Matthew Carmody's fire with the Spencer rifle in his hand. Carmody sat there hunched over, staring moodily into the blaze. A man stood on the other side of the fire. Sebe's nerves gave a jerk when he saw that it was Russ Maugher. He halted, listening.

Maugher was saying, "I tell you, Matt, it's the best thing to do. There's water in those hills, and we can reach it by sun-up. The cattle won't bed down, anyway. And if they're going to keep on the move, it may as well be along the trail!"

"All right," Carmody said heavily. "We'll drive all night."

"And you'll drive straight into an ambush," Sebe said, striding forward. He saw the look of shock on Maugher's face. The man must have thought the rider he'd heard was a vaquero coming in from the bed ground. It was possible that he believed Sebe wouldn't return once he had escaped—at least, not until he could bring the rangers. Sebe saw Maugher's right hand go to his gun. He swung the rifle up, braced its stock at his thigh, let the muzzle bore at Maugher's chest. "Go on—draw!" he yelled. "All I need to kill you is an excuse like that!"

Maugher's face sagged. He lifted his hands, held them against his chest. His eyes glittered wickedly in the firelight. Matthew Carmody rose, turned to Sebe. "What's that?" he demanded.

"I scouted those hills," Sebe said. "They're swarming with riders."

"A damn' lie," Maugher growled. "A trick to hold you here, Matt!"

"I don't care a hang now whether Matt Carmody goes to Mexico or to hell," Sebe stated. "But I'm not going to let his riders and their families ride into a gun trap! Turn around, Maugher—turn, or I'll gut-shoot!"

Maugher saw the look in Sebe's eyes and knew he meant exactly what he said. The man turned, and Sebe, circling the fire, relieved him of his six-shooter. Facing Carmody again, Sebe said, "You can make your decision, Matt. But if it's the wrong one, I'll go to the women and tell them what lies ahead. Once they know

the danger, they'll take their men away from you. And without your vaqueros, you're done for!"

"You win," Carmody said dully. "I'll do as you say."

Sebe wasn't surprised. Matthew Carmody was no longer the man who had ridden roughshod through the history of Texas. The warrior was now a crippled and infirm veteran, and the fight had gotten beyond his control. Sebe said, "We'll drive tonight. But not south. We'll swing northeast. It'll be hard going, but it's our only chance. You tell the vaqueros!"

Carmody nodded, turned, hobbled over to his sleeping riders. He roused them, and their excited talk, when they knew of the change of plans, proved they were eager to turn back. Carmody woke the women, told them to prepare to move out. Sebe told Russ Maugher, "Saddle up my dun, and a mount for yourself. You're riding along. And don't try to make a break!"

The vaqueros strung the herd out in a hurry, though a dozen or more cattle were too weak to be driven and were left behind. The wagons rolled out, drawn by tired gaunted horses, their women drivers chattering out of new-found hope. Matthew Carmody rode at his usual place ahead of the herd. Sebe followed him, gun-guarding Russ Maugher.

The desert wind rose, and a sandstorm beat at the outfit. The grittydust was a blinding dry fog, and, though the gale didn't last long, it gave Russ Maugher his chance. When the dust was thickest, Sebe couldn't even see his horse's ears. He didn't become aware that Maugher was gone until the swirling dust let up for a moment. He grabbed out his gun, looked wildly about. It was too late.

He saw Carmody up ahead, the point riders behind. Maugher, however, was gone. There was no use attempting to follow him, for the dust came again in a great cloud as thick to the sight as a blanket. Sebe swore helplessly. He knew that there hadn't been proof enough to say that Maugher had planned to raid the outfit—and without real evidence, the rangers couldn't have hanged the man.

But now there was a chance that Maugher would bring his outlaw crew after the slow-moving outfit, for revenge now as much as for greed. It all depended upon how near Maugher believed the rangers to be—and how much he feared them.

THE WIND let up after a couple of hours, and the going became easier. But cattle could be driven only at a plodding pace, and it would take four or five days to reach Rosario. Sebe's only hope lay in Sam Hayden's Company K having reached that village. Yet there was no assurance of it. Hayden might not have gotten the message; the rangers could be far from Rosario, trying to find the trail without any luck. The long night finally passed, and there was a trace of gray-pink in the east. Then a shout lifted from the drag.

Sebe knew instinctively what their shouts meant. He swung his dun about and rode back past the herd, six-shooter in his fist. Guns began to roar. Streaks of powder-flame cut the gloom. A sudden thunder broke, and Sebe saw that the herd was stampeding. A voice bawled, "That's it! Keep 'em running!"

Sebe wasn't sure, but he thought it was Russ Maugher's voice.

A man galloped past Sebe, wobbling in the saddle. Another went down when his horse was hit. Sebe now sighted some of the raiders—seven of them in a tight bunch—and he swung toward them. His six-shooter racketed. A man screamed and toppled from his mount, another was hit and grabbed for leather. The other five swerved away, but fired back at Sebe. He targeted another outlaw with a back-shot; then his horse stumbled and somersaulted.

Sebe hit the ground in a heap, and lay dazen for a moment. When he picked himself up, most of the shooting had let up. The raiders had withdrawn out of gun range. They were gathering in a big bunch out across the flats, and Sebe judged that they were, even with those shot down, two dozen renegades. He turned to his horse and found that it had gotten to its feet, and apparently was unhurt.

He mounted and took after the herd and the vaqueros that were following it at a hard run. Along the way he took the rider who had lost his mount up behind him.

The desert was dotted with cattle that had been too weak to run far. Some had gone down and been trampled by the charging mass, and lay dead or crippled. But the stampede had swerved away from the wagons, leaving them safe. Sebe dropped the vaquero off by the rigs, and told him, "Get the outfit among those rocks ahead!"

He knew that they couldn't outrun the outlaw band. The Carmody outfit would have to take whatever shelter there was and make a standing fight of it. He rode after vaqueros, yelling at them. "Let the cattle go! Get in among those rocks!"

They obeyed him, and the cattle spread far and wide—which was what the outlaws had wanted. They could be rounded up later, and Russ Maugher was in no hurry about that. He was closing a trap. Sending his renegades out in pairs, he formed a circle about the stand of rocks like a noose about a doomed man's neck. Some of the outlaws left their horses, crept forward to rocks or gullies that gave them cover within rifle range. They started sniping.

But for the women and children, and the lack of a water supply, the position among the rocks would have been a good one. Sebe knew, however, that he could not hold it long if Maugher and his crowd made a determined attack after a long siege. . . . But he shaped up his defenses. The wagons were unhitched and formed into a square stockade, and the women and children crowded inside.

The vaqueros were posted strategically—there were fifteen of them, ranging from the fifteen-year-old Mateo to an old-ster of nearly seventy. The man who had been wounded in the raid was out of it, and being cared for by his wife. Sebe found Matthew Carmody still sitting his horse, a dazed look on his bleak face.

"We'll need every gun, Matt," Sebe told him. "Get down and take cover behind that rock yonder."

As the old man obeyed, the sniping increased. Slugs whined and shrieked, ricocheted among the rocks. Daylight was now upon the land, and the sun climbed high. As Sebe and the vaqueros fired whenever a target offered, the renegades dared make no rush. But the sniping continued, and Sebe could see the burly Russ Maugher, well out of range, riding about giving his men orders. Sebe was puzzled. Maugher could get away with the Carmody cattle, and it was crazy of him to waste lives just for revenge. Then Sebe remembered what Maria had said about her father's money box. Maugher was after more than revenge!

VII

MAUGHER held them under fire all morning. Two vaqueros were wounded in that time, and one—the old-timer, died with a bullet through his heart. Some of the horses were killed, or wounded so that the vaqueros had to shoot them. Maugher knew this sort of game; he sowed fear, and let it grow into despair. Then he bargained.

The sniping let up when the sun was highest, and one of the renegades rode toward the rocks with his right arm held high. Sebe shouted to the vaqueros, "Let him come on!"

The man halted at the halfway mark between the two forces, and yelled Carmody's name. When the old man showed himself, the outlaw said, "Maugher's giving you a last chance, Carmody. You savvy—a last chance You're to send that ranger out with your money box. Then you and your outfit can pull out. Maugher says you've got an hour to make up your mind. When you hear a shot, you send the money out. But that Burton hombre has got to bring it!"

He whirled his horse and rode off as soon as his piece was said.

Sebe muttered an oath, thinking, *So Maugher wants revenge too!* And he was to be the victim. Sebe gazed around, at Matthew Carmody and at the vaqueros—at the women and children. The ones who understood English were telling what had been said to those who knew only Spanish. Never in his life had Sebe Burton

been singled out by so many pairs of eyes.

Matthew Carmody stood erect, looked suddenly more like the man he once had been. "No!" he muttered. "We won't do it!"

But the others were looking at Sebe, the same question in every pair of dark eyes. Sebe knew what they were thinking, that it was better for one man to die than many—and among them women and children. Sebe too had that thought in his mind. But he shrank from it. He was young, and full of plans for the future. There was Maria, who still hadn't given him his answer. He had the thought too that if the fight went on, they might hold out until Sam Hayden and his rangers arrived. Yet he knew that it was no good. He wasn't sure that Company K would appear in time. He drew a fluttery breath.

"All right," he said. "Bring out the money box."

IT WAS an iron-banded wooden chest, so heavy with gold and silver specie that two vaqueros were required to lift it from the wagon to the horse upon which it was to be tied. Sebe knew that it contained Matthew Carmody's lifetime accumulation of wealth, yet he was not impressed. His loss would be far greater.

He mounted his dun horse, and a cowhand handed him the reins of the animal packed with the money box. Some of the women were weeping now, and some had turned to prayer. Sebe stonily waited for the signal He had his six-shooter in its holster and his rifle in its saddle boot. But he was armed merely out of habit. He had accepted the bargain. He could not put up a fight when he rode out.

He looked at Carmody. "Tell Maria," he said. "Tell her . . ."

He didn't know what sort of message to give her. He thought drearily that she would forget and one day marry Steve Randall. And—well, that was only proper.

Matthew Carmody said hollowly, "I want you to know, Sebe, that I realize I did wrong. It was a matter of honor, and I——"

A gunshot smacked abruptly on the clear air.

Sebe hesitated only an instant. Then he lifted his hand to the people watching him, and rode from the rocks. He saw Russ Maugher and two of his renegades on a rise to the west. He imagined that he could see Maugher's ugly grin . . . Sebe was halfway out when Carmody shouted his name and the Mexicans started yelling.

Sebe reined in, bewildered. He twisted in the saddle, looked back at the rocks, saw some of the vaqueros gesturing wildly toward the east. He shot a glance in that direction, saw the dust cloud—and the riders that lifted it. Sebe's heart leapt. It was Sam Hayden's rangers!

Maugher and his men saw the danger, and the gun-linked circle broke. The renegades rode hard to gather about their leader, but Ross Maugher had gone berserk. His cursing lifted. He slammed his gun barrel down upon the head of an outlaw turning to flee. He bellowed orders, and his hold on that wild crew was a strong one. The renegades paused, turned their guns on Sebe—who was riding back toward the rocks.

A bullet tore through the dun's left rear leg, another found its head as it fell. Sebe narrowly escaped being pinned beneath the dead animal. He drew his six-shooter, sprawled out behind the dun's body. The sorrel horse packed with the money box halted ten feet away to nibble at a tuft of bunch grass. The renegades came charging in, guns blasting, to capture the sorrel.

The vaqueros in the rocks opened up with a ragged fire, and the rangers, hearing the shooting, same on at a gallop. Sebe could hear Company K's wild shouts. His own gun was roaring. He downed a rider in front of him, hit another and made him swerve off. Others dropped under fire from the rocks. But the remainder came on, driven by Russ Maugher's unholy yelling.

The rangers' guns were crashing now, though those riders weren't yet within accurate range. A renegade swept by Sebe, caught up the sorrel's trailing rein. A slug caught the man in the head. Riders churned around Sebe, their guns racketing. But his seemed a charmed life. He was

as yet untouched. Suddenly he realized that the renegades were no longer shooting at him, but at the oncoming rangers.

It was a pitched battle then, for it was too late for the outlaw crowd—those still alive—to escape. It was like a clash between two details of enemy cavalry, with only sabers missing. The sorrel was caught up again—this time, Sebe saw, by Russ Maugher.

Sebe turned his gun on the renegade chief, but the hammer fell on a fired cylinder. The weapon empty, Sebe sprang to his feet and ran at Maugher. He feared that the outlaw would escape in the confusion, under the cloud of dust and powder-smoke. Maugher was already raking his big black horse with savage spurs, and heading west. Sebe started after him, running hard. He flung aside the empty gun.

He darted past the sorrel, came up behind Maugher's black. The renegade looped his tied reins about the saddle horn, freeing his left hand. In his wildness to get away with the money, he wouldn't let loose of the sorrel' reins now gripped in his right hand. He grabbed out his gun, fired a wild backward shot. The next instant Sebe sprang up and wrapped his arms about Maugher's thick body.

Sebe's weight dragged Maugher from the saddle, and as they fell together, Maugher's six-shooter exploded and Sebe felt red-hot pain as the slug tore into his left side. But despite the pain, he kept his grip on Maugher. The renegade heaved one way and another, trying to break loose. He whipped Sebe about in his convulsive twisting, but Sebe rode his back. Suddenly Maugher reared up, and Sebe's arm slipped. Maugher kicked backwards, and his spur ripped through the homespun and flesh of Sebe's leg. But the ranger again flung himself upon Maugher's back, this time getting his right arm locked across the man's throat. Sebe's left hand grasped his right wrist. He applied pressure.

A frenzied cry was wrung out of Maugher. He clawed at the arm throttling him. He flung himself over backwards, trying to crush Sebe under him. Sebe's head reeled from the impact, but he increased rather than relaxed the pressure. He heard strangling sounds, and felt the power leave Maugher's huge body. The renegade scarcely kicked now, but still Sebe didn't let up . . . He was beyond knowing, for his brain was befogged by pain. Even when Captain Sam Hayden appeared and said, "Let loose, bucko. Your man's dead, and the fight is over," Sebe didn't understand.

It took two rangers to break his locked grip.

THEY PATCHED Sebe up, applying what crude surgery the Frontier Battalion knew. A shelter of wagon sheeting was rigged up for him and the other wounded . . . And it was three days before Sebe even began to feel like himself again. Captain Hayden told him that only eight renegades had been taken prisoner, that the others had been killed in the fight. Two rangers had died, and four were suffering from wounds.

"Matthew Carmody's dead, too," Hayden said. "He rode into the thick of it, and those outlaws blasted him out of the saddle."

The Mexican women were caring for the wounded, but Maria was there too—doing what she could to make Sebe comfortable. He could see the grief in her eyes, and he finally told her that he was sorry about her father.

Tears filled her eyes. "It was best that he died," she said hollowly. "He would have blamed himself too much, if he'd lived."

"Steve Randall,'" Sebe said. "I haven't seen him."

"He followed me to Rosario," Maria replied. "But he wouldn't return here when I left with the rangers. I think he'll go back to Virginia. He told me that he could never like Texas. It's best that he goes."

"And he'll go alone?"

"Of course," said Maria.

And her faint smile told Sebe Burton that it was because of him that Steve Randall would leave alone. Sebe had Maria's answer, at last.

Wild Bill Hickok's Death

By TALBERT KELLEY

Suddenly, the slow-moving, nonchalant man went into action. He drew his gun . . .

"AS TO KILLING MEN, I never thought much about it. The most of the men I have killed it was one or t'other of us, and at such times you don't stop to think."

Thus spoke James B. "Wild Bill" Hickok, superman of the quick-draw artists, who could whip his gun from his holster like the strike of a snake, faster than the eye could perceive. As evidence of the deadly skill of this famous gunman, it should be noted that he was killed, like Billy the Kid and Jesse James after him, without a chance to fight for his life.

Bill's shooting technique was not conventional. He was a "pulse shooter." His two revolvers had the triggers removed, and were fired by the hammers which were sanded smooth. When Bill drew, the instant his fingers grasped the butt, his thumb cocked the gun. After the gun was clear of his holster and aimed, always from the hip, Bill had only to lift his thumb—and add another death to his list.

Deadwood Gulch, Colorado, the scene of Wild Bill's death, was an outlaw town in 1876. A free-and-easy outpost with gunfights so numerous a man could hardly walk across the street without having to fall flat on his face at least once before he reached the other side.

It was the gold that brought Wild Bill to Deadwood. He and a companion, "Colorado Charlie" Utter, had left Cheyenne to try their hand at prospecting in Deadwood. It was said later, though, that Bill did most of his digging after gold with poker cards.

SOME say that when Wild Bill first rode into the town with Charlie he had a grim premonition of what was going to happen. "I have a hunch that I am in my last camp and will never leave this gulch alive," he said.

Charlie glanced sharply at Bill to see if he were serious. "Stop dreaming, Bill," he answered, laughing.

"I'm not dreaming. Something tells me that my time is up, Charlie, but where it is coming from I don't know."

That night, his apprehension growing heavier, Bill wrote the following letter to his wife:

Agnes Darling:

If such should be we never meet again, while firing my last shot, I will gently breathe the name of my wife—Agnes—and with wishes even for my enemies I will make the plunge and try to swim to the other shore.

J. B. Hickok.

The next day, August 2, 1876, Bill was playing his favorite game, poker, in a saloon. Sitting at the table were Carl Mann, Charles Rich, and a steamboat pilot, Captain Massey. They were laughing and enjoying their game.

For the first time in his career, Wild Bill was sitting with his back to a door. This was because Charles Rich, in a playful mood, had deliberately taken Bill's seat. It was merely a good-natured joke on Charlie's part. Surely he had no way of foreseeing the tragedy which was going to result.

"Come on now, Charlie," Bill gently requested, "trade seats with me."

"Why, Bill," Charlie replied, winking at Mann and Captain Massey, "you shouldn't mind sitting with your back to the door—you're supposed to have eyes in the back of your head."

Bill, standing before a bar, had once shot two men entering the saloon from opposite directions; and he could stand between two telegraph posts and hit them both simultaneously. It had often been said that he had eyes in the back of his head.

As the game progressed, a man named Jack McCall strolled casually into the saloon. In an effort to hide the nervous fear that burned within him, he sauntered over to the bar. He glanced indifferently at the card players, not giving the slightest hint of his cowardly purpose. Presently he turned and walked slowly to a point a few feet behind Wild Bill and paused. The men at the table scarcely noticed the unsuspicious-acting newcomer.

But suddenly the slow-moving, nonchalant man went into action. He drew his gun swiftly, as if he were trying to get the drop on an adversary whom he was facing in fair combat rather than an unsuspecting man who had his back turned to him. He fired once, and the bullet crashed through the back of Bill's skull; it issued from under the right cheek bone and hit Captain Massey on the arm.

Bill slid from his stool, his poker hand crimped in his fingers. He had been holding two pairs: aces and eights, known since that day as a "dead man's hand."

Wild Bill Hickok died instantly, and no last breath was permitted him with which he could gently whisper the name of his wife—Agnes—as he had promised.

A cruel fate presided over Bill's death that day. The cowardly killer had taken every precaution to give Bill no opportunity to fight for his life. But little did Jack McCall, the assassin, know how close he came to being number thirty-seven on Bill's list. The Colt .45 used by the murderer was later examined. It contained six cartridges *and all but the one that killed Bill were found to be faulty, and would not have fired.*

COMANCHE PASS

By C. HALL THOMPSON

Could a white man ever trust a redskin? Thor, beautiful queen of the Comanches, gave Logan the answer he wanted. And then she asked: "Can a redskin ever trust a white man?"

THE PASS was narrow and the walls of mountain it cut through came up almost sheer out of raw foothills. Now, in moonlight, the rock was pale and shot with shadows where ridges scored the wall faces and in the shadows, things moved.

A man listened to sounds like that; it could be the hop of a jackrabbit. it could be the scrape of a moccasined foot in loose shale. The brush muttered with wildlife. A horned lizard looked through dusty eyes at the chuckfire men had built only a hundred yeards from the mouth of the Pass; an antelope caught the man-smell and fled through whispering buffalo grass. Beyond the first bend of the Pass, there was nothing but darkness. A man could die in darkness.

Dana nodded his red bony head.

"They could drygulch every last man of us."

The men around the fire didn't say anything. Firelight made the worry lines cut deeper into their faces. A barbed-wire of a man called Trask spit at the flames and said, "Damn it," Only the tall lighthaired man leaning against the chuckwagon hub did not frown. His pale eyes stayed on Dana. They didn't blink.

To the west, beyond the circle of the camp, the Staked Plains rolled softly, a tide of moonpale grass murmuring in the night. Longhorns bawled hollowly; their shadows moved against the grass. Somewhere a cowboy riding guard at the herd-rim sang Dinah Had A Wooden Leg in a coarse yodeller's voice. Dana's eyes studied the cattle-hulks that shifted, restless, across the Plains as far as a man could see. They were hard eyes in a hard face. The lips bent in a smile; it was only a stiff *V* with no humor in it. Dana's body was young, but the face belonged to a man who had known the wilderness army under Donaphan, and been a leader among the men who tore the Staked Plains from the Shoshoni to make the raw material of a new cattle empire. He had come a long way in a few years. The smile was a possessive smile; the eyes were remembering that most of this herd belonged to him—and the tall man leaning against the chuckwagon hub.

The smile went away. Dana's glance swung back to the ragged gash of Comanche Pass.

"Take quite a spell getting five thousand head of longhorn through a gap that narrow." He looked at the tall man. "I don't know, Logan, but seems like your Comanche friends could wipe us out neat and never even poke a feather out of ambush."

Logan handed back the stare. He got makings out of a shirt pocket and started to roll one. His fingers were steady; none of the tobacco spilled. He caught the sack-string in his teeth and yanked it shut. He held a twig to the flames. He lit up and exhaled. The men around the fire waited.

Logan said in a quiet voice: "They won't attack us."

A thickset man named Yancey chewed the end of a stringy mustache and looked hopeful. Trask grunted a hard laugh. He snapped a twig and flung it into the fire. They all watched Dana. The short, powerful body seemed taller now and somehow dangerous. The flat smile remade its *v*. Dana's eyes narrowed on Logan. "You got inside information?"

"I know Quanhadi and his men."

Yancey nodded and smiled; then stopped because Dana was watching him too steadily. Dana's hand moved over the butt of a lowslung .45. He stared at the Pass shadows.

"Cut it however you like," he told Logan. "Quanhadi's still a Comanche . . ."

The laugh came from Trask again; now, it was sour approval.

"And Comanches got a way of living up to reputation," he said.

"Now, wait a minute . . ." Yancey frowned; he fastened his eyes on Logan and kept them there, as if that way he could take Dana's stare and still speak his mind. "Logan ought to know what he's talking about. He's seen this country; he's lived with this tribe . . ."

Logan dropped the cigarette and ground it under a bootheel.

"You know, there *are* peaceful Comanches."

Dana laughed; it was a short dry sound. Trask and a couple of others echoed it.

"I know there're Comanches that *seem* peaceful," Dana said.

The laugh stirred again briefly. That cowhand riding nightguard went into Old Dog Tray. The men around the fire got quiet. Loan's lips stretched in a tight line.

Dana looked at Yancey.

"Sure. Logan knows Quanhadi's tribe." The hard gaze snapped to the tall man. "But maybe he knows somebody else even better . . ."

A muscle twitched in Logan's temple; brown fingers traced the cartridges in his gunbelt.

"I don't follow you."

Dana raised one russet eyebrow.

"You ain't heard the stories going around?" He smiled thinly. "Pretty stories, Logan. About a white girl called Thor. Her father was a mountain man; her mother died on the trail when she was born. Comanches got the father, but the baby wasn't killed. Chief named Quanhadi took a fancy to her; raised her as his own daughter . . ." He stopped smiling. "There's another story, too. It tells how a white man fell in love with this Thor . . ."

"Shut up," Logan said tonelessly.

Trask had started a grin; he wiped it away. Logan's eyes were cold.

"Thor's got nothing to do with this . . ."

Dana's mouthcorners turned down wrily.

"You love a woman and she's got nothing to do with the way you think?"

Nobody laughed. Logan moved slowly on long, thin legs. He circled the fire and stood facing Dana. Dana blinked; the smile was gone; his fingers closed on the gunbutt. Logan said in a level voice:

"I do my own thinking. Quanhadi's tribe is peaceful. They trust us and they want to be trusted. They'll let us use the Pass."

For a moment Dana didn't move. With Logan so close it was not as easy to smile. Finally, he managed it.

"I still say the Comanches could use these longhorns . . . The massacre of a few whites never stopped them before . . ."

TRASK SWORE; the others looked uneasy; Yancey didn't meet Logan's eyes. A man sweats blood readying a herd for market in Dodge City; everything he has is tied up in it; he doesn't like the idea of taking chances. Yancey chewed his mustache. He looked at Logan.

"Maybe Dana's right. We can always drive North around the mountains."

"I didn't mean that," Dana said sharply. "Driving North, we'd lose weeks; the cattle'd shed weight. . . . No. We don't want no detours. Comanche Pass leads plumb into the Western Trail to Dodge. It's the best route we could find. Comanches or no Comanches, that's the way we travel from now on. . . ."

They were words with a gun behind them and a bullet for anybody that stood in their way. They worked. The man looked relieved. Logan watched them, thinking, "It's an easy relief, cocking a Colt hammer and waiting to kill; a hell of a sight easier than trusting. . . ."

"Even Quanhadi does say no . . we take the Pass." The narrowed eyes mocked Logan. "Even if you're mistaken in trusting a girl named Thor . . ."

Logan's hands came up sharply and clamped on the rawhide vest, dragging Dana close. Pinpoints of fire winked in the pale eyes. The words squeezed through Logan's teeth.

"Another crack like that and I'll wring your scrawny neck."

Things got too quiet; somewhere a steer bellowed. The men were on their feet; but nobody interfered. Logan's fingers relaxed. Dana stood very still; his mouth was twisted; he was sweating. They waited. Then,

Dana's body dropped like a dead weight bouncing crazily against the jutting stones.

in a sudden sharp whisper, Trask said:

"Comanche!"

The Indians were in no hurry; they came slowly in single file from the darkness of the Pass. There were five of them on paint ponies. Moonlight made pale streaks on their greased hair. They rode easily, not separate, but like some part of the animals they sat. A buffalo robe around his shoulders, Quanhadi was in the lead. Then, as the men by the fire watched, another horse drew alongside his. The rider was Thor.

She was small with black hair and eyes to match it and the kind of lips that parted slightly under a kiss. She had on moccasins and faded dungarees; the homespun shirt was tight across her breasts and open at the throat and looking at her Logan thought of the syrup brown of the skin there at the throat and the small pulse that beat like water from a desert spring when a man was dying of thirst. For a moment, he was not conscious of the others; he was remembering . . .

There had been a white man injured in a fall from a spavin pinto and delirious with the pain of a broken thigh; there had been Comanche braves carrying him to a camp east of the Pass and later, much later, this girl they called Thor, laughing with him as he grew well; laughing in the quiet at the green edge of a desert sump and then, suddenly, kissing. She had not laughed afterward; there had been words then about something that lay between them, a difference betwen a white man and a white girl who was still somehow an Indian. "If you could take me the way I am, take me as a woman," she had said. "If the Indian in me made no difference to you . . . But you can't; not now. Now, the Indian and the white are separate in your mind. Maybe, someday . . ."

Someday, Logan thought. A man changes and someday . . .

He saw her dismount and the warmness of her body moving toward him, as if it were the most natural thing in the world and then her face was quite close and bronze in firelight. Her arms were around his neck. He kissed her and it was all there, like that time by the pool, none of it changed, and it didn't matter if the men were watching . . . Only it did.

He felt himself stiffen at the thought of it and the way they would laugh later and talk about "Logan's squaw." Then, she drew away, and he could see the hurt in her eyes. He wanted to take her back, to make her see that the old difference between them was gone. Only the moment was past and slowly now she turned from him and walked back to Quanhadi's side.

The Indians stood very still in a small knot on the far side of the fire. They were unarmed. One young buck eyed Dana's Colt suspiciously. Yancey gnawed his mustache. Trask kept snapping twigs with long, nervous fingers. Nobody said anything. Dana had that smile pasted back on. Quanhadi didn't return it.

Logan spoke to Quanhadi in dialect. The Indian nodded. Dana's eyes slitted.

"What'd you say to him?"

"I told him these were the men that wanted to use the Pass for a cattle trail."

The smile stiffened. Dana said flatly: "These're the men that are going to use it."

"I'd take it easy, if I were you," Logan said. "Maybe some of them don't speak English, but they all understand it."

Quanhadi's dark flat eyes held Dana's. Dana looked away. The Indian said in dialect:

"This Pass is used into buffao country to hunt game; Comanche must have it, too. The white man cannot control completely . . ."

Dana frowned. "What's he talking about?"

Logan told him.

The narrow bony face hardened. Hanging just over the gunbutt, Dana's fingers were clawed. His eyes went dark with arrogant pride. He looked at Quanhadi. His voice was harsh.

"The Comanche doesn't question the White Father; the Comanche trusts."

"Trust?" Quanhadi said in English. "Trust white man who steal our lands Trusts him who kill our game for sport?"

"Why, you red bastard . . !"

Logan saw Dana's hand close over the gun; he heard a threatening mutter run through the Comanche bucks, and felt

Thor's eyes on his face and then he was between Dana and Quanhadi; his fingers clamped on Dana's wrist; the gun didn't clear leather. Dana's face was red; he swore thickly. Logan kept the words one notch above a whisper.

"Don't be a fool. These boys may not be armed, but let one hair of Quanhadi's head get mussed, and you'll have more than five braves to answer to." His eyes swung to the dark Pass. "The hills are probably squirming with Comanches . . ."

Dana's mouth worked; he jerked his arm free and let the gun slide back into the holster. He stood there, breathing hard. not looking at anybody. Yancey sighed through yellowed teeth. Trask scowled at Logan. The Comanches waited. Logan's eyes moved quickly from one cattleman to the next. Yancey gave him a short nod. The pale gaze went back to Quanhadi.

Logan's words were in dialect and flatly clear in the stillness. "If the white man uses Comanche Pass in safety, the Comanche will do the same."

Quanhadi's dark face didn't show what he was thinking. He looked steadily at Dana; the red face was raw with controlled anger; the lips quivered. Very quietly, Quanhadi said:

"It is agreed."

FOR A TIME, no one moved. In the upper shadow of the Pass, a cliff swallow swooped and screeched. Out in the tall grass the cowboy began to sing again. Then, Quanhadi turned and walked beyond the circle of the camp to the dark lee of a wagon where the ponies waited. The Indians mounted. Thor moved toward her palimino. The Indians reined around and rode slowly off. Thor didn't mount; she stood very still beside the pale horse when Logan said her name. She waited there, in the shadow, out of sight of the men by the fire, and then there was the sound of his boots on the packed earth of camp clearing and his fingers hard against her shoulders. He kissed her; she kissed back. Her breath came in small sobs against his buckskin vest. Abruptly, she turned from him.

"Thor."

"No . . ."

"Thor, I still have that piece of land on the Plains. We could be happy . . ."

"No, don't touch me. Please."

She stood with her back to him; her fingers were taut around a spoke of the wagonwheel. Her voice was deep in her throat.

"I can't think when you touch me. And I want to think."

"It's not thinking that counts. It's feeling. Inside. I know I've changed."

She shook her head gently. He could smell the meadowscent of her hair.

"The difference is still there," she said.

"No."

"It is. It's still in your mind. It was there when you were ashamed in front of the men tonight. I could feel the shame in you; I could feel you thinking how they'd laugh at your 'white squaw' . . ."

She turned; her eyes were very bright; she had stopped crying.

"There's no difference," she said softly. Not really. White, red, the blood is the same. The woman and man are the same. But the difference is in the mind. It's born there; it's hard to get shut of . . ."

Logan's hands caught her shoulders.

"I tell you I've changed . . ."

There was something sad in the way she smiled. Her fingers combed the blond hair above his ear.

"You want to change. You want to believe in my people; trust them like you'd trust a white . . . Only the doubt is there . . ."

"But, they're not your people, Thor . . ."

"They're all my people. The color of the skin doesn't matter. I told you. The difference is in your mind . . ."

Logan's face worked; he let go of her.

"But the Pass; in this business of the Pass I trust your people . . ."

"Do you? If something went wrong, if there was a real reason to doubt, would you still trust them?"

"Yes," he said thickly. "I tell you, there's no difference. Not anymore. Tomorrow, I'll show you. Tomorrow in the Pass . . ."

The lonely smile came back into her eyes and then drowned suddenly in the fierce hope that darkened them, and she was against him, her mouth on his and

whispering all the time in a soft, desperate voice, "Yes, tomorrow, please tomorrow . . ."

She left. The unshod hoves of the Indian pony didn't make much noise. Logan stood looking after her until she was lost in the black mouth of the Pass. He kicked at a splinter of greasewood and swore under his breath. He turned to go back to the camp. That was when he saw the other rider.

He was a narrow-shouldered man who owned maybe two hundred head of the herd. His name was McCleod. Logan watched him walk away from the group by the chuckfire and untether his chestnut. The horse shied as McCleod mounted and reined him to face North. McCleod waved once; Dana gave a small salute. The chestnut cut out at a gallop. Wherever he was going, McCleod was in a hurry. Logan went to the fire. Yancey looked up at the strike of his boots, then turned away. Nobody spoke. Trask made circles in the dust with a cottonwood twig; he smiled to himself. Logan didn't like the smile; it had a secret behind it. It was like Dana's eyes; hard and too wise. Dana set fire to a cigarette. Logan said quietly:

"Where's McCleod headed?"

Nobody answered. Dana smiled sarcastically.

"So everything's just fine with Quanhadi . . ."

"It will be, tomorrow," Logan said. "Tomorrow, we'll go through. And they won't touch us—or any that follow us . . ."

Dana's grin got nastier and more wise; he and Trask passed it between them.

"I made sure of that," Dana said.

The faint snap of dried brush in the fire was very clear. A coyote's lonely call came and went. Logan looked at Yancey. Yancey stared at the ground.

"McCleod?" the tall man asked.

Yancey didn't look up; he nodded.

Dana laughed briefly.

"McCleod's men are on the North edge of the herd, Logan. Longhorns and ponies can't climb sheer mountains. But, a posse of men can. They'll fence in those Comanches in the hills. When we go through the Pass, if the Indians show one sign of a doublecross, McCleod's boys shoot first and ask questions later . . ."

The words died away and nobody filled the silence. Logan stared at Dana.

After a minute, very quietly, he said: "You're a fool. You know that, don't you? You're a damned fool."

Dana kept the smile steady.

"This'll ruin everything," Logan said. "Quanhadi'll know— you don't trust them . . ."

Dana shot his cigarette butt into the fire. "They're not to be trusted."

"But, they should trust you, is that it? They should trust the great White Father while he knifes them in the back . . ." Logan's pale eyes had gone dark. "That's where we been wrong from the start. If you want them to believe in you, you got to be strong enough to believe in them. You got to show them you're not afraid to trust."

"Did they trust us, tonight?" Dana asked. "You said yourself the hills were likely thick with Comanches . . ."

"That was before the treaty was made . . ."

"Treaty!" Dana's grin went sour. "Treaties are mighty easy to break."

He eyed the men. He was talking to Logan but now the words were for them.

"We didn't coddle them in '46. Kearney didn't fall for their treaties. We got them first and trusted them later . . ."

A couple of the men nodded; their faces were grim. Logan's voice was flat and cold.

"And what'd you get with those tactics? I'll tell you. You got hatred; massacre. You got women raped and babies torn apart. Your way didn't work then; it won't, now. If Quanhadi gets wind of your little trick, he'll be afraid to trust us. He'll strike first . . ."

"If he does," Dana said levelly, "at least, we'll be ready for him."

The men didn't say anything. They didn't have to. The approval was in their narrowed eyes and stiff lips. None of them met Logan's stare. After a while, he shrugged faintly and turned away from Dana's red mocking smile. He went and sat on the edge of the chuckfire circle. He smoked. Nobody said anymore about the matter. Yancey passed Logan on his way to the wagon. He said

goodnight; it sounded more like I'm sorry. Logan studied the tip of his cigarette and said, "It's all right."

It wasn't long before the rest of them turned in. Logan lay by the fire for a time, thinking. He was sprawled on his side, facing the black mountain wall. Once, through the smoke of the dying fire, he saw something move along the upper lip of the cliff. The rider was small and bent forward. The horse was headed North at a gallop. In the moonlight, it looked like a palimino. He was half asleep and he thought he imagined the whole thing.

THEY BROKE CAMP at sunup. The Pass didn't look anymore inviting by daylight. A morning haze hung at its bottom, chilling the foothills. The shrill noises the cowhands made were raw on the early air.

After breakfast, Dana and Trask rode out to the mouth of the Pass. The men watched, mounted and ready. Dana and Trask came back. Some of the men looked at Dana. None of them asked the uneasy questions that nagged them. A small wind stirred in the Pass; a tumbleweed rustled briefly. Nothing more.

Trask swore to himself. "It's too quiet. Everything's too damned quiet."

Yancey chewed his mustache, frowning toward Dana.

"He asked for it," he muttered. "Maybe he'll get it."

Dana heard. He glared at Logan. The tall man's lips stretched in a thin smile.

"It's your party," he said quietly.

Abruptly Dana stood in the stirrups. He waved a hand forward and yelled, "All right! Let 'em run!"

The longhorns moved toward the Pass with a slow dry thunder. Red dust rose and coated lips and got under eyelids. Cowhands cursed and bullied. The cattle swelled in a dark horned tide behind the leaders. They entered Comanche Pass. The dust got worse. Russet stone closed in on two sides.

Trask's mouth worked. He kept looking at Dana, and his eyes had a strained, listening expression. They had gone beyond the fifth turn in the Pass when Trask said, "I don't hear any shots . . ."

He spoke to Dana. His voice was raw with nerves. Dana looked at Logan quickly. The tall man's face didn't show anything. Dana glared over Trask's head, as if he hadn't heard. He bawled an order to a cowhand. Then, suddenly another voice drowned his. It was Logan's calling a halt. The wagon groaned to a standstill. Behind it, longhorns surged to a stop. Dana's face was bright red.

"What the hell is this?"

He reined about sharply to face Logan. The tall man sat still, his hands resting on the saddlehorn.

He looked at Trask.

"You were figuring to hear shots?"

Trask went pale under sunburn. His tongue moved in the dry hole of his mouth. No words came. Logan's eyes swung to Dana.

"All right," he said. "Let's have the whole story."

Dana's sorrel shifted restlessly under him. Dana tried the sour smile; it wasn't very strong. "I gave McCleod some special orders."

"Such as?"

"Such as his Posse not waiting for Quanhadi's men to doublecross us. Such as wiping out the Comanches before they got the chance . . ."

A thick mutter ran through the riders. Very softly, Yancey said, "I'll be damned." The men looked from Dana to Trask. Their eyes were hard. Trask was sweating again. His hands went tight around the Winchester.

"It was Dana's idea."

"Shut up," Dana snapped. He didn't look at Logan. "Ride on ahead," he told Trask flatly. Trask hesitated, then obeyed. Dana turned to the men. "There's a ridge you can see past the next turn. McCleod'll signal from there when it's safe to go on . . ."

No one answered. The men waited. Shadows came and went along the pass. Dana's face was very red.

"All right! I broke the treaty!" His beady eyes switched to Logan. "You and your big talk! Maybe you don't know the Comanches like I do. Maybe you ain't seen the pretty little torture-parties they dream up for white men. . ."

"For men that give them a raw deal," Yancy said.

"For any white man that's fool enough to trust them!" Dana rasped. "Maybe you'd like to see for yourself. Maybe you want details. They slice a man's belly open with a hunting knife. Not enough to kill him, oh, no. Just enough so his insides are exposed. Then, they take and tie him, spread-eagle, in the desert. He's always alive when the vultures and coyotes get at him."

Yancey said: "Logan told you these Comanches was peaceful."

"Yeah. Logan told me. Only I'm not swallowing any fancy words. When I'm through, this Pass'll be clean. There won't be need to trust anybody. It'll belong to us. . ."

The words dwindled. Dana blinked under Logan's stare. In a low deliberate voice, Logan said:

"Thor is with Quanhadi's men."

THEIR HORSES were less than a yard apart. Logan dove from the saddle, his shoulder smashing into Dana's chest. The sorrel whinneyed shrilly and reared, and then the two men were on the hardpacked canyon floor, twisting in a cloud of red grit. Dana's thumbs cut into the tall man's throat. Logan wrenched free and rolled on top. He got to his feet, dragging Dana up with him, his right fist knotted on Dana's vest-front. Dana tried to block the left. It got through. Knuckles caught him across the nose and mouth. When they came away there was blood on them. Dana stumbled backwards against a rock wall and Logan held him there, upright; very deliberately slamming his open hand back and forth across the stunned face and cursing to the brutal rhythm of the blows. Nobody tried to stop him.

"Dana!"

Logan stopped abruptly and turned, Dana dropped back against the flat stone; his breath came in thick gulps. Trask pulled up short; his horse reared. He stared from the tall man to Dana. The red face glared back at him through hurt pride. Dana swabbed blood from his lower lip. It was Logan who spoke.

"Well? What is it?"

Trask swallowed. "McCleod. He ain't on the ridge."

The cattlemen muttered uneasily. Logan's eyes swung to Dana. Dana's mouth was still quivering; but slowly that sour smile bent the corners.

"I told you I didn't hear no shooting," Trask said hollowly. "I don't like the smell of this. That posse couldn't've got to the Comanches. McCleod'd be on the ridge, signalling, if . . ."

"If something hadn't happened to him," Dana cut in. His voice had the same hard brightness as his eyes. "If the Comanches hadn't drygulched him before he could get to his posse . . ."

Logan's hands turned into fists.

"You're jumping the gun again, mister. You don't know McCleod was drygulched."

"I'll bet on it," Dana said. "I'll give you odds. Go on. Take me up."

Logan didn't say anything. The laugh was bitter in Dana's throat.

There's your trusting redskins for you. There's your peaceful Comanches that would never doublecross you . . ."

"Shut up," Logan said.

Dana turned to the men:; the red-stained mouth twisted.

"Look what his trusting got you. Look where you are, now. Trapped. Clay pigeons, waiting to be picked off by ambush guns."

The lips clamped tight shut; the voice had gone to high and afraid, and now the men were watching him too closely, as though they had seen the fear in him. Dana looked away. Trask kept searching the foothill shadows with nervous eyes. The men shifted in their saddles. Dana's words had sunk in. One by one, they turned to Loga.

He stood very still. It was all there in his face. There was something behind the pale eyes they couldn't know. A half-mem ory caught on the edge of sleep, a small rider on a palimino moving swiftly into the North, the same direction McCleod had gone. Logan swallowed hard.

"All right," Dana said thinly. "Why don't you trust them now?" Why don't you go on through the Pass?"

Logan wasn't seeing him; he wasn't seeing anything but the rider and horse, pale

in moonlight; he wasn't hearing anything but the doubt whispering, *Maybe he's right, maybe the trusting is wrong, maybe Thor.*

He broke off the thought deliberately. His face was stiff; the tic in his temple twitched. He could see the men again; he could feel them, watching him—waiting. Thor, his mind said; for Thor . . . His lips felt dry when he moved them; he heard his own voice, far away and cold.

"I'm going on through. Anybody wants to come along, all right. But, if you do, they shed their guns. There'll be no more show of being afraid . . ."

The brown fingers unbucked his gunbelt. He walked to the wagon; his spurs made a small clinking in the dust. He put the guns in the wagon and turned to face the men. His hips looked bare.

"It's a chance," he said levelly. "Take it or leave it. I'm taking it."

None of the men moved. Behind the barrier of mounted cowhands, the cattle bawled restlessly. Men who had ridden up from the rear to find out the trouble sat quiet, watching Logan. Somebody gave a nervous cough. The cattlemen exchanged frowning glances. Yancey made the move. Without a word, he went to the wagon and laid his sawed-off shotgun beside Logan's Colts. Very slowly, one by one, belts were unhitched; gunmetal thumped against the wagonbottom.

For a long moment, Trask hesitated. He blinked at Dana's rigid face. His finger kept itching on the trigger of the Winchester. Then, he swore softly and threw the rifle on top of the growing heap. He didn't look at Dana.

"Let's ride," Logan said.

It was slow going; the next turn was always the worst; doubt lay beyond it, and fear and a death that came too slowly under Comanche torture. The bellow of the longhorns rubbed nerves raw.

Trask's fingers kept working as if lonely for the cold metal of the Winchester. Afternoon shadows shifted, grew deeper and very silent.

Logan and Yancey rode slowly in the lead. They rounded an abrupt turn. Their horses shied; Yancey caught at Logan's arm. Behind them, men reined in sharply. Logan freed his arm. The words came in a tight whisper.

THE INDIANS were ranged across the narrow width of the Pass. They were all mounted. Quanhadi sat his paint rigidly at the center of the barricade. Jagged lines of yellow and green warpaint sored his russet face. His men were armed to the teeth. Behind the barrier, lashed to his saddle and gagged, McCleod sat, hemmed in by a circle of Comanches.

Sweat made wet streaks on Dana's jaws. He twisted in the saddle, facing the men.

"You asked for this," he said thickly. "I warned you. No. You had to listen to big talk. You had to walk into a trap."

Men looked at him, then away. The mask had got out of control. It wasn't a pretty sight. Quanhadi ignored the red, warped face. His beard-black eyes stayed on Logan. Overhead, a swallow squalled. Quanhadi spoke in English; his voice echoed flatly.

"Who sent this rider to the North?"

The Cattlemen muttered. Yancey turned to Dana. Logan kept staring at Quanhadi.

"How did you know about him?"

Quanhadi didn't answer. Beyond the line of Comanches another horse moved; a palimino edged through and came alongside Quanhadi. Thor's hair stirred, darkly rich, in the small canyon wind. There was a cold hurt in her eyes.

"You see a lot from the top of a cliff," she said quietly. "You see riders sent out by a white man that claimed to trust your people."

"No." Logan stopped.

There was too much space between them; there were too many words keeping them apart.

Quanhadi's eyes left Logan and moved slowly from one man to the next. They stopped at Dana. The sorrel whinneyed as Dana hands tightened on the reins. Quanhadi said softly:

"Was it, them, the red one feared to trust us?"

"He didn't mean harm. It was only a safety measure," Logan said.

"Shut up!" Dana's voice was harsh. "You don't have to excuse me to any red-

skin," he told Logan. "Sure. I sent the rider. I knew this would happen if I didn't."

"It happens because you did," Thor said quietly.

A dangerous purr ran through the barrier of Comanches; it was the warning of a roused cougar. The line bulged slightly toward Dana. The brave Dana had been watching, leaned forward and Dana let out a yell. His hand came from under the vest; it was full of a vicious little derringer. The shot licked out. The brave lurched and spilled to the left. He slid from the saddle heavily. The hole in his chest was just over the heart. He died before the echo of the shot.

Quanhadi's men stared at the body. Slowly all eyes turned to Dana. A thin ribbon of smoke still spiraled from the derringer. He wet dry lips with his tongue.

"That man went for a saddle-gun."

The eyes shifted. They could see the saddle plainly. There was no gun.

A sick smile started on Dana's lips; it faded quickly. "No," he said, hoarsely. "I tell you, I thought." His gaze swung to Logan; they were eyes begging for help. Logan didn't see them.

Thor was watching him. He could feel the challenge behind the stillness of her face. The words were there in his head, hard yet somehow gentle with hope, as if she had spoken them aloud a long time ago and what he heard now was a last echo. This is the something gone wrong she talked about. Last night she asked the question. What you do with Dana now will be your answer.

The Comanches also waited. Dana wiped sweat and dried blood from his chin. Logan dismounted. He stood, his feet planted a little apart, facing Dana. He said, "They expect a death for a death, Dana. They expect me to kill you."

A watery smile jerked at Dana's lips.

"You're joking. You wouldn't kill one of your own kind. Because of a lousy Indian?"

The sentence went shrill and snapped off. Dana stared dully at Logan. Slowly, the tall man walked toward the wagon; the cattlemen opened an aisle for him; they watched as he strapped on his gun-belt. They saw him take up Dana's holster. He flung it at the feet of the sorrel. The gun made a flat thump and lay still in a small puff of dust. Dana stared at it.

"You can't let him do it!" he rasped. "I tell you, you can't trust them! How do you know they won't turn on you even if I am killed?" The warped face twisted to Logan. "How can you be *sure?*"

Logan's hands hung loosely above the Colts. There was a sick knot at the pit of his stomach. All right, he thought; there it is, the question, the old doubt. Can you face it? Can you still trust? He looked at the men, and then it wasn't complicated anymore because the answer didn't belong only to him. The men had something to say. They said it in the way their hard eyes watched Dana.

It wasn't just a matter of his life or theirs. It was the life of one fool whose fear had broken the trust, against the life of every white man who ever dared to use Comanche Pass. It was Dana's death or a blood feud that would never die.

"Pick up the gun," Logan said softly.

He watched Dana; he saw the thick body hesitate, half-stooped. He felt Thor's eyes on him, and the fear strangely mixed with the pride that lay behind them. For an instant, his gaze met hers. Dana made his move.

The heavy form lurched to one side. A hand closed over the Colt and Dana spun toward the raw shadows of the foothills. Yancey swore. Dana ran swiftly and bent low. One of Quanhadi's men raised a rifle.

Sharply, Logan said, "He's mine!" The Comanche didn't fire. Dana made the cover of brush and jagged stone.

Logan moved forward at a deliberate, easy pace. His boots scraped in dry shale. He heard the whine of a bullet. He didn't stop. Dana's laughter was shrill; a darker shadow darted upward along the mountain path and flung itself behind a boulder. "All right!" Dana screamed. "Come and get me, big words!"

Logan didn't break his stride. He didn't answer. His hands closed on the Colts. The second shot burst. Logan heard the whine and something heavy took a burning

slice out of his right shoulder. He twisted and fell to one knee. The gun slid from numb fingers. From the high ledge, the wild laugh came again. "What's keeping you. Logan?"

The men below could see Dana, now, flat against the cliff wall about seventy feet above them; the mountain path had dwindled to nothing. Dana had gone as far as he could.

Logan swayed a little. His left thumb clicked back the Colt hammer. He was only fifty yards from Dana. The third shot screamed and Logan dove suddenly to the left.

He fired from the ground, sqeezing off the trigger with swift, brutal precision. He emptied his gun.

Dana's thick body was pinned back to the wall by the impact of the slugs, lurching as each bullet tore into him. He fell forward. The body dropped like a deadweight, bouncing crazily against jutting stones. It landed face up. The red grit cloud cleared slowly. There wasn't much left of Dana.

Nobody moved.

A cloud shadow sifted through the Pass. A curious steer bent his head and nuzzled the body. Nobody moved.

The tall man came down through the foothills slowly. His right arm hung limp. Blood made the shirt stick to his shoulder. He didn't speak. He walked past the body through the aisle of cattlemen. He stood beside the roan and grasped the saddlehorn with his good hand. He mounted and sat very straight in the saddle.

Quanhadi and the Comanches watched silently. Logan looked at Thor; her face was smooth and softly brown. She smiled. He smiled back.

The palimino came forward and turned, standing flank to flank with Logan's roan. Thor gave him the reins. Her hands stayed on his.

The braves sat quite still, looking at Quanhadi. His dark eyes studied Logan and the girl. Then, he raised one hand. Beyond the barricade, Comanches moved. A knife winked. The rawhide thongs fell away from McCleod's wrists. The gag was untied. Slowly the barrier shifted. Indian ponies drew aside. An aisle opened through the heart of the Pass. Quanhadi nodded to Logan and Thor. Logan turned to the cattlemen.

"All right," he said quietly. "Let's ride."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 of FRONTIER STORIES, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for Oct. 1, 1948.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Malcolm Reiss, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the FRONTIER STORIES and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, Malcolm Reiss, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Managing editor, none; Business manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is . . . . . (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

(Signed) MALCOLM REISS,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 21st day of September, 1948.

LIONEL G. MOORE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1950.)

REBEL'S BRAND

By TED FOX

JIM BLAINE rode his horse curiously around the outer circle of Conestogas camped on the prairie half a mile from town. He counted thirty-six; big, white-hooded freighters, loaded to their canvas tops. Inside the circle a score of campfires trailed thin streamers of smoke toward the sky. Here and there sun-bonneted women bent over cookstoves. A dog barked at Jim's horse.

He quieted him with a gentle hand on his neck and rode frowning toward the crowd of men and a few women standing on the plain a short distance away. They were gathered about a horseman. A man in the blue uniform of the Union cavalry.

Jim's frown deepened. First, there was this wagon train. It was different from the scores of weathered, trail-worn trains pouring west from Kansas. These wagons

They rode side by side across the plains, Sally Deering, the starry-eyed Union belle, and Jim Blaine, the Rebel shave-tail. But even the war-cries of Shoshone braves couldn't make them forget that they were sworn enemies!

were new, their canvas fresh and clean.

The sight of that blue uniform gave Jim a funny feeling inside. It was the first he'd seen in three long months. It brought back memories. Unpleasant memories.

HE REINED his horse to a stop on the fringe of the crowd and, resting his hands on the saddle, listened to what the man in blue was saying. Jim was tall and lean and sunburned, a youth of twenty-one or two at most. His buckskin leggings and shirt were worn, but clean and neat.

"We need guns," the Union man was saying. "We need ammunition and clothing and food if we're going to beat the Rebels and beat them this coming winter."

He paused and looked around at the sea of faces turned toward him. "The Confederates are fighting with their backs to the wall," he continued. "They know they're beaten but they won't give up and they've turned savage for revenge. They're plundering, looting, killing innocent civilians, torturing their prisoners."

Jim's fingers tightened about his saddle horn.

"I know what I'm talking about," the man shouted, "and to prove I'm not lying I want you to listen to a father whose son was taken prisoner and later murdered by the Rebels. He's John Deering, the man who's leading this train east."

The crowd stirred, then fell silent as a tall, white-haired oldster held up his hand. He spoke in a deep, calm voice. "My son, daughter, and myself came to California five years ago. When war broke out my son went east and enlisted. A year ago his letters stopped. One month ago we heard from a friend in his regiment that he was dead."

When Deering faltered a girl pushed through the crowd and stood at his side. She was a very pretty girl, slim and brown-haired and wearing a blue flowered dress.

"Bob was wounded and taken prisoner," Deering went on slowly. "He was taken back of the lines where his leg swelled up with infection for lack of care. It was amputated, hacked off without any anaesthetic. A week later he was put in prison. There he was starved to death." Deering's voice was suddenly harsh and bitter. "He was deliberately starved to death."

Jim's hands clenched his bridle reins fiercely. He thought of the thousands upon thousands of Confederate soldiers fighting without guns, without proper clothing, without food to eat. He thought of them dying in hospitals from lack of care, tortured, starved simply because there were not enough doctors, not enough anaesthetics, not enough food. Not enough of anything for themselves—let alone Union prisoners.

For an instant he was tempted to ride into the crowd and tell them the truth. To do so, however, would be signing his death warrant.

Wheeling his horse Jim rode away from that crowd and the wagon train. He didn't look back. He rode swiftly, angrily, across the plain toward the low drab group of buildings that was called Mountain City. Beyond, the foothills rose lazily, tier upon tier, like steps. On a clear day some of the tallest peaks of the Sierras could be seen in the distance. Now a blue haze deepened the valleys with color as the sun sank slowly over the California hills at Jim's back. The air was cool with the first faint trace of fall in it.

He splashed through a muddy stream winding down the broad valley and riding up the opposite bank, turned into the town's one main street. Mountain City was the last stopping-off place on the long trek east, the first trace of civilization after crossing the Sierras on the way west. It was a dusty, windswept town. A town of saloons and stores and warehouses. The tinny sound of a piano playing could be heard from one end of the street to the other. Pack-mules and saddle-horses lined the hitch-racks on both sides. The plank-walks were crowded with trappers and knee-booted miners in woolen shirts and corduroy breeches.

Jim suddenly became aware of the hoofbeats coming up behind him. He stiffened, then relaxed when two horsemen drew up alongside him, one on either flank. He glanced at the one on his left,

then looked at the one on his right.

"Well?" he asked.

They were tall, lank men with beards. They were dressed in buckskin. The one on his left flank was called Silent. The other was Hank. Those were all the names they had.

The one named Hank nodded. "We got the information you wanted. This Ross Parrish owns a feed store and has a warehouse at the end of the street. He's there now."

Hank had spoken thickly through bearded, tobacco-stained lips and now Jim's face grew stern. "Where'd you get your information?" he asked.

Hank avoided his gaze. "Back yonder."

"Where?" Jim repeated.

When Hank's face grew sullen and he didn't answer, Jim turned to Silent. "Where?" he insisted.

"In a saloon," Silent said grudgingly. "That old coot had to have his whiskey so what could I do?"

Hank snorted angrily. "You mangy dog," he growled. "You was just as thirsty as I was."

Silent slouched forward in his saddle. "You call me a mangy dog once more, you old coot, and I'll slide this between your ribs." A long-bladed knife appeared in his gnarled fingers.

Hank's rifle swung over his saddle-bow and pointed squarely at Hank's chest. "Go ahead," he taunted. "I'd like nothing better'n an excuse to put an ounce of lead in your mangy carcass."

THE TWO MEN glared at each other across Jim's horse. Jim ignored their snarling words. He'd listened to their fighting and quarreling for better than three years now, and he'd never known it to grow serious.

"I gave strict orders not to touch any liquor," Jim spoke angrily. "This is Union country we're in and when you get a few drinks under your belts you're both like a couple of old women—you like to talk. You'll only have to say a little too much just once and we'll be swinging at the end of ropes."

The two old men scowled at each other then slowly Hank's gun lowered and Silent's knife disappeared into the sheath at his belt.

"There wasn't no harm done, Jim." It was the closest Hank could bring himself to apologize. "There was only the bartender and another gent in the saloon."

"What kind of gent?" Jim asked quickly.

"Looked like a gambler," Hank went on. "He bought us the last couple of drinks."

"I don't like it," Jim said worriedly. "I shouldn't have let you ride on ahead. That Tennessee drawl of yours is a dead giveaway."

They'd come to the end of the street closest to the hills and Silent suddenly nodded toward a low shed-like building at one side. Across one wall was painted the name "Parrish."

Jim rode around the end of the building where half a dozen big freighters were lined up, teams dozing in the traces. In the gathering darkness he made out a group of men loading the last wagon. Two burly teamsters were just lifting a flour-barrel into the bed.

Jim dismounted and let his reins trail to the ground. Hank and Silent slid out of their saddles and followed him toward a thin, sandy-haired man standing at one side, watching the loading with an anxious eye. Jim stopped in front of him.

"Ross Parrish?" he asked.

The man looked at him warily and nodded.

"I'm Jim Blaine," Jim said, "Lieutenant, Lee's Army of the Confederacy."

The man's eyes brightened and a smile flashed across his lips. He stuck out his hand and there was a note of relief in his voice when he said, "Glad to know you, Blaine. I was beginning to think you wouldn't get here in time."

"My orders were to arrive on the seventeenth," Jim said. "We got here the fifteenth and have been camping out in the hills for two days." He turned and faced the wagons. "These them?"

Parrish nodded. "Just finishing loading."

Jim introduced Hank and Silent. Parrish motioned toward the warehouse. "Let's go in and I'll tell you what our

plans are. There's been a change since you left Richmond."

He led the way in to a small office at the back of the building and lighted a lamp. Hank and Silent stood by the wall. Parrish drew up two chairs and sat down facing Jim.

"Our original plan," he began, "was to have you take the wagons through alone, but it's too risky. The Union people have spies everywhere and if a train isn't known and accounted for, they stop them and search them."

"The Indians clear back to Kansas are on the prowl," Jim offered.

Parrish nodded. "That's another reason. Six wagons would never get through alone."

"So " Jim asked.

"It's arranged for you to go back with that train you might have seen camped outside of town," Parrish said.

Jim looked at the other man in surprise. "It sounded to me like it was a Union train."

"It is." Parrish leaned forward tensely. "It's a Union gun train. Thirty-six wagons loaded with guns and ammunition and manned by recruits for the Union army."

Jim frowned.

"I know what you're thinking," Parrish said hastily, "but let me finish. I have a reputation in this country for being a staunch Union sympathizer. So much so that I've donated six wagon loads of food to the Union cause." He jerked a thumb toward the closed door. "Those six wagons out there."

Jim's face began to clear.

"The safest place you can be is with a Union train," Parrish said. "Right under their noses."

Jim laughed shortly. "You're right," he agreed. "If they don't find out who we are and what we're carrying."

He sobered quickly. "What about the teamsters?"

"Loyal Confederates, every one of them," Parrish said emphatically.

"That makes nine of us," Jim said softly. "Nine against maybe sixty or seventy." He looked at Hank and Silent. "Can we handle them?"

The two old men nodded.

"Nine Rebs equals seventy Yanks," Hank said.

Silent looked around for a place to spit, swallowed instead.

"Our job's to get those wagons through, and we will," Jim said simply.

Parrish's gaze dropped to his feet, then his glance lifted quickly to Jim's face. "There's another reason I've arranged for you to go with this Union train," he said slowly.

When he hesitated Jim waited patiently for him to go on.

It's a lot to ask, or expect, of anyone," he said, "but this Union train must not get through. Somehow between here and Kansas you've got to destroy those guns."

Jim stared at Parrish in astonishment, then he whistled softly. "That's a double order for sure," he said. "My Lord, Parrish, isn't it enough to take six wagons two thousand miles through enemy country without having to destroy thirty-six wagonloads of guns?"

"No," Parrish answered calmly. "The war is at a crucial stage. Every gun, every ounce of ammunition going to the Union army must be destroyed. Every bit of help for the Confederacy must get through."

Jim sat stiffly on edge of his chair, his face tense and red. Then slowly he relaxed. "Where's the gold?" he asked quietly.

"In the barrels, mixed in with the flour and corn meal. One million dollars in bars."

Jim was sweating suddenly. He was thinking of the consequences if they were ever discovered. He was wondering if the true contents of those barrels could be kept a secret for the three months or better that it would take them to reach Kansas. Three months was a long time.

"You couldn't have a much tougher assignment," Parrish must have read his thoughts. "Just remember the gold comes first. One million now will enable our government to buy supplies for our armies. There are plenty of Yankee firms who will sell to us, but only for cash."

Jim looked up quickly when a hand touched his shoulder. He saw Silent standing beside him. Silent jerked his head

toward a door that led from the office into the warehouse proper.

Jim heard it in the same second. A faint sound, as though someone had stepped on a loose board. He came to his feet and moved toward the door all in one swift motion. He didn't hesitate there. His fingers closed on the wooden bar, raised it. He plunged through the door into pitch darkness.

HE COLLIDED with a heavy body and for an instant was thrown off balance. A smashing fist rammed into his mouth and he felt his teeth crunch. A second fist hooked into his stomach and the wind left him in a rush.

Bent double, gasping for breath, Jim plunged forward and his outstretched hands closed on a man's arm. He pulled that arm toward him, like a man going up a rope. He let go with his right hand and his fist lashed up in a wild arc. It cracked against bone. He heard a surprised grunt.

Jim kept his legs driving. He drove his unseen adversary back in a crowding rush, his fists lashing out with all the power he could throw into them. Behind him he could hear a rush of feet as Hank and Silent plunged through the doorway.

He heard Parrish's frantic call. "Don't let him get away!"

Jim flung himself forward again, hands clawing. They clutched empty air and he lost his balance and fell. Rolling over once he came erect. Running feet echoed down the long warehouse. The four walls flung the sound back mockingly into his face. With a groan of anguish he started in pursuit.

He'd taken two steps when he felt Hank and Silent race past him. But they were too late. At the far end of the warehouse he saw a door open. For an instant a bulky shape was outlined in the starlight. Then it was gone. An instant later his two partners were crowding through the door. Then they too were gone.

Jim leaned heavily against a packing-case. His head was swimming and his stomach hurt. Bitterly he cursed his failure. His opponent had been a big man, and powerful, but light on his feet, and fast.

Hands clenched in dismay Jim made his way back to the office and dropped into a chair. He could hear the voices of Parrish and his teamsters outside in the darkness.

"Search the other warehouse," Parrish was saying desperately. "Find him. Hunt him down. But be quiet about it. If anybody asks what you're doing tell them you're looking for a sneak-thief."

Jim heard running feet go by the door. Then Parrish came in. His face was pale, his eyes worried. He dropped into the other chair and looked at Jim.

"It was my fault, not yours," he said finally. "I should have posted guards." He smashed one closed fist into the palm of another and his voice grew tight with exasperation. "Damn!"

"I didn't even get a look at him." Jim touched his teeth with his fingers. His lips were sore and puffed. When he took his hand away he looked at his fingers and they were red with blood.

They waited in silence. Jim took out his handkerchief and wiped the blood from his face. He felt sick to his stomach; sick in spirit.

Parrish got up and paced the floor restlessly. He repeated once again under his breath, "Damn!" and sat down heavily in his chair.

Hank and Silent were the first to return. They shook their heads. "Got away from us," Hank said shortly. "Didn't even see him."

One by one the teamsters came in. They were big burly men, a tough-looking lot, but Parrish had vouched for their loyalty and Jim was satisfied. Each in turn shook his head silently.

"All right," Parrish excused them. "Finish loading. Two of you stand guard in the street and let us know if anyone comes."

The men filed out. When they were gone Jim and Parrish looked at each other.

"How much do you suppose our eavesdropper heard?" Parrish asked uncertainly.

Jim shrugged.

"How do you suppose whoever it was knew we were here talking?"

Jim looked at Hank and Silent. They stared back at him, not fully comprehending.

"There's no telling," Jim said slowly.

"Now what?" Parrish turned his palms up helplessly. "If he did hear it'll be all over town in a few minutes." He stretched his neck suggestively and made a face. "Perhaps we'd better clear out."

Jim shook his head emphatically. "No," he said sharply. "He might not have heard. We're not clearing out until we're sure."

"It won't take long to find out," Parrish said.

Jim looked at Hank and Silent and nodded to the door. "Walk up the street," he said," " and see if anything's stirring. "And," he added sternly "stay out of the saloons."

When the two old men were gone Jim and Parrish settled down once again to wait.

"I don't see how he could have helped but overhear everything we said," Parrish muttered half under his breath. "That wall is only half-inch stuff and full of cracks and knot-holes."

II

HALF AN HOUR LATER Hank and Silent returned. "Everything quiet," they reported.

"We didn't go in none of the saloons," Hank added, "but we looked in and everybody was drinkin' calm enough." He licked his lips thirstily. "It was mighty temptin'-lookin'."

"I can't figure it," Parrish said, frowning. "He must have heard. And yet why hasn't he spread the news?"

Jim stared at he other man thoughtfully. "You and I would probably report it, have the spies hung and the gold confiscated," he said. "But some people might not. A million dollars is a lot of money. Maybe our unknown friend is ambitious. Maybe he'd like to have that money for himself."

Parrish was startled. "Supposing that was so? What would he do?"

"Wait. Let the train go out. Then raid it."

Jim stood up. "There's only one thing to do and that's to stick to our plans. If he didn't overhear us, that's all to the good. If he did . . . "

"Then you're starting under one hell of a handicap," Parrish said with a skeptical shake of his head. "You'll be sitting on a powder-keg every mile of the way, knowing it will blow up under you."

Jim smiled wryly.

"I wouldn't like to be in your shoes," Parrish said, "and I think you should have a chance to back out, if you want it."

"How about it?" Jim looked at Hank and Silent.

Hank snorted disgustedly.

Silent squirted a foot-long stream of tobacco-juice onto the floor.

"There's your answer," Jim grinned. "From all of us. But what about the teamsters?"

"They'll stick," Parrish said. "They're good men. Fighters all. You'll need them."

They went outside and stood in the darkness, watching the last of the wagons being loaded. When it was finished and the tarpaulin was lashed securely over the flour barrels, Jim shook hands with Parrish.

"Good luck," was all Parrish said.

Jim and his two campanions mounted their horses. The teamsters were already on their seats. A whip cracked and the first wagon began to roll. A second whip cracked. Then a third, and a fourth, and all six wagons lumbered forward. A horse snorted in the darkness. Bit rings jingled in time to the steady thud of hooves.

Jim rode between Hank and Silent as they skirted the edge of town and headed across the valley toward the lights of the Union train winking through the darkness. A three-quarter moon lighted their way and covered the valley and the surrounding hills with light.

Hank turned in his saddle and looked back at the line of wagons strung out behind. "A million dollars." He whistled softly.

"Half the men in Californy would murder their mothers for a slice of that."

"I wish I was back in Tennessee,"

Silent growled, "'stead of traipsin' all over this goldurned continent. Wish I was back with Gen'l Lee fightin' the goldurned Yankees."

Hank snorted. "Fightin'? When'd you do any fightin', I'd like to know?"

Silent shifted sideways in his saddle. "You dang old coot, you know I fit for three years with Gen'l Lee."

"Ha!" Hank squirted tobacco-juice at the ground. "The way you fit at Shiloh, I suppose." He turned to Jim. "This mangy dog found a cider house on one of the farms we was chasin' the Yankees acrost and danged if he didn't hole up there and drink a barrelful of cider that was so hard you couldn't cut it with a ax."

"Ha!" Silent snorted in response. "An' where were you at the time, I'd like to know?"

"Drinkin' the other barrelful of hard cider," Jim answered the question for them. "Lying on the floor right beside you." He grinned into the darkness. "If you'll both remember, it was I who found you and sobered you up before you were shot for desertion."

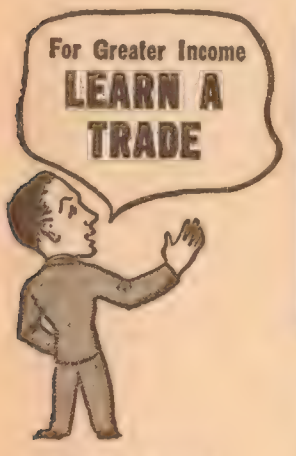
Both old men shifted uneasily in their saddles.

"Couple of old women," Jim chided them. "Don't you worry, Silent. You may be fighting Yankees before you know it. The less talking you do, the better."

There was a gap in the circle of freighters and Jim motioned for his wagons to fill it. He rode into the inner circle and dismounted before one of the fires. Sixty or seventy people, mostly men, were sitting about on the grass at the various fires, eating their suppers. They turned their heads and watched Jim's six wagons pull into the circle. The teamsters jumped down and began unhitching their teams.

John Deering stepped away from the nearest fire and came to meet him. He introduced himself and they shook hands.

"This is my daughter, Sally," Deering said when the girl Jim had seen with him a few hours ago stepped up to stand beside him.



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SALLY DEERING'S FINGERS felt cool and slender in Jim's big hand. Close-up, she was even prettier than he'd thought, and her eyes were blue and friendly. For a long minute he held her hand, then he saw the color mount into her cheeks and hastily he let her go. She stepped back a step in confusion but he saw she wasn't angry and, strangely, he was both glad and relieved.

"I'm in charge of the Parrish wagons." Jim wanted to make that perfectly clear right from the start. "We appreciate your letting us join your party."

"We're very happy to have you," Deering said. "Ross Parrish has done a very generous and unselfish thing donating these wagonloads of food to the Union."

Deering took Jim by the arm and led him to the fire. He was a man in his sixties, tall, weatherbeaten, but gentle in his speech and manner. Hardly the sort to be leading a train east. He was more the preacher or school-teacher type.

"Join us for supper," he said cordially. "We were just getting ready to eat."

Hank and Silent had edged near and were looking down longingly at the food cooking on the fire.

"Hot journey-cakes, Hank murmured, smacking his lips hungrily. "Ain't seen one o' them in three months."

Deering turned to Jim in surprise. "You've been on the trail three months?" A frown grew in his eyes. "Where are you from, Blaine."

Jim shot Hank a warning glance. "Oregon," he said. "We took our time, hunting, and fishing."

"What brought you to California?"

"Gold," Jim answered half-truthfully. "But when we heard Parrish was looking for someone to take his wagons east we applied for the job."

"Why" Deering asked.

Jim plunged on with his lie. It had to be a good story or Deering would grow suspicious.

"To enlist in the army," Jim said. "Do you know of any better reason than that?"

Deering smiled. "No, I do not," he said emphatically. He slapped Jim on the shoulder. "If I was half my age, or if they'd accept me now, I'd be doing the same thing. The army's where every man belongs as long as his government and his country needs him."

Jim wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. Sally Deering was dishing out journey-cakes and beans onto tin plates and she gave Hank and Silent each one. They withdrew a short distance and sat down on the grass to eat.

Behind them Jim saw several of his teamsters building a fire and setting out cooking utensils.

He sat down between Sally and her father when she had served them. She was still wearing the blue dress with a wool shawl thrown over her shoulders against the evening chill. A splash of ribbon shone in her hair. Jim guessed her age at less than twenty.

"Do you know the trail east?" Deering suddenly asked.

"I've been over it once," Jim asked.

"How long ago?"

Jim hesitated. "Two years."

Deering's voice sounded worried. "I understand the Shoshones on this side of the Rockies are on the warpath; and then Blackfeet; and then the Sioux. We'll have to run the gauntlet of all three nations before we reach Kansas." He paused. "Do you know what's in these wagons of mine?"

"I'd heard it was guns," Jim said.

"That's right. Four food wagons for use on the trail and thirty-two wagons filled with rifles. It would be had if they got into the hands of the Indians."

"You have a strong force," Jim said, "and nothing like that's going to happen."

Sally laughed nervously.

"I hope not."

"It's just something to think about," her father said.

Jim ate his super quickly. Twice he turned his head and caught Sally looking at him. Finally she asked, "Have you been fighting, Mr. Blaine? Your lip's swollen and cut."

Jim ran his hand gingerly across his mouth. "Just a little trouble with one of my teamsters," he anwered easily. "Nothing serious."

Jim finished his supper and rose to his

feet. He had been watching Hank and Silent who wolfed their food down and now were drifting around the circle of wagons, talking with Deering's men. Jim thanked Sally and her father, then went to his friends, and taking each by an arm, led them between two wagons onto the open prairie.

"Hank, you talk too much," he scolded the old man. "You almost spilled the beans back there in front of the Deerings."

Silent nodded agreement. "I told the old coot to shut up."

Hank's hand dropped to the handle of his knife. "You told who?"

"Cut it," Jim ordered sharply. "No quarrelling."

"That mangy dog—"

"We're Confederate soldiers in enemy country without uniforms," Jim talked him down. "That makes us spies. And they hang spies. Do you know what it's like to dangle at the end of a rope?"

Hank shook his head. "Don't reckon it'd feel very comfortable," he said.

"If you don't keep your mouth shut you'll find out quick," Jim cautioned him. "And so will we."

Hank rubbed the side of his jaw ruefully. "From now on I'm dumb as an Injun without a tongue. They kin hang me if I ain't."

"They will," Jim promised him.

They returned to the camp and their wagons. Jim called the teamsters together and gave orders for each man to sleep under his own wagon and to shoot first and ask questions afterward should anyone come snooping around.

"Don't look like that feller heard what we was talkin' about this evening," Hank said. "Ain't nothin' happened."

"He heard all right," Jim answered. "He's probably decided to try for it himself."

Jim spread out his blankets by the fire and lay down. Hank and Silent joined him and soon Hank was snoring loudly. Jim listened to him a moment, and grinned. Even in sleep the old man liked to make himself heard.

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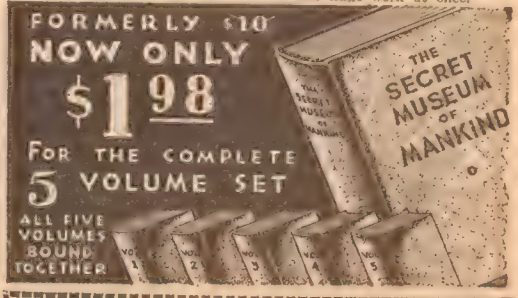

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III

JIM AWOKE with the first faint trace of dawn streaking the eastern sky. The camp was already stirring. Fires were blazing and men stood about preparing breakfast. The Deerings were up. Sally waved to him across the circle and Jim waved back.

Breakfast over, the job of hitching up the wagons began. Men shouted at their teams and at one another. In the confusion, Jim saw Sally with her hands over her ears. A haze of dust hung over the camp.

Jim had just finished saddling his horse when a sudden commotion across the camp drew his attenion. He walked over and, as he drew near, saw the dozen or so teamsters that had gathered about John Deering and another man. Sally stood by her father, listening. There was an argument going on between Deering and the stranger.

The man was tall and powerfully-built. His hair was black and his complexion was swarthy and a livid inch-wide scar ran diagonally down across the right side of his face from his ear to his mouth. It It could have been a bullet crease; or the jagged cut from a broken bottle. It could have been a burn, from a branding iron, or perhaps a whip.

He was a big, powerful man but for all his size he stood lightly, balanced forward slightly on the balls of his feet, like a fighter or a panther ready to spring. And his clothes too were oddly out of place in this camp of roughly-garbed teamsters. He was wearing the black trousers and the long-tailed black cut-away type of suit that was to be found mostly in the cities. His shirt was white and clean and held together at the throat by a black string tie. His hat was black as well.

"There isn't any room for you in this train, Creel," Deering was saying.

The man answered quitely, softly, "That's too bad, but you'll make room for me, won't you?"

Deering shook his head stubbornly. "No, you're not wanted here.

"You can go east by yourself or you can hook up with another train."

A smile came to Creel's lips. It was cold and mirthless and Jim tensed.

"I don't like to travel alone," he said. "And this is the last train east until next spring."

"I'm sorry—" Deering began.

"You and I better have an understanding about this." Creel moved forward on the balls of his feet. "I'm going east with you."

Deering stood his ground. "No," he said.

With less warning than a snake would give, Creel struck. Open-palmed he slapped Deering across the mouth, brought the back of his hand back against the side of Deering's head, slapped him in the mouth a second time. Deering's head wobbled under the force of the blows and he staggered back.

Creel jumped after him, pressing his vicious attack. This time his fist was clenched when he struck Deering. The old man plunged to the ground and lay in the grass, groaning.

With a strangled cry Sally sprang at Creel. She beat against his chest with her fists. She kicked him in the leg with her sharp-pointed shoes.

Backing away, Creel laughed at her first few blows. Then her kicks hurt and the smile left his lips. His hands reached out and grasped her shoulders. He drew her toward him and his arms dropped and encircled her waist. Laughing again he drew her tight against his chest. Sally tried to push away. She tried kicking him. She was powerless in his grasp. Embarrassment and a trace of fear suddenly showed in her eyes. She was on the verge of tears.

It was too much for Jim. He walked up to Creel on the left side and grasping his ear in his thumb and forefinger twisted it until the big man let out a bellow of surprise and pain. His arms fell away from Sally and with an oath he sprung and lashed at Jim with his knotted fist. Jim took the blow on his arm and knocked it up.

But Creel was on him then crowding him back with a rain of blows to his head and body. Jim parried the first two, but the third got through to him and he

felt fresh blood flow from between his lips.

With his back to a wagon Jim stopped giving ground. He drove his fist wrist-deep into Creel's stomach. Creel grunted as the wind left his lungs. It was the big man's turn now to back away, and Jim pressed his advantage.

Then suddenly Creel ducked under Jim's blows and grasped him with his hands. His powerful shoulders hunched, his leg shot out behind him and Jim felt himself falling.

He hit the ground hard. In the same split moment Creel landed on top of him. He landed feet first, the leather heels of his boots crushing Jim's ribs. Then he dropped to his knees, straddling Jim's body, and his fists lashed Jim's face and neck with whip-lash ferocity.

Jim tried to twist away, but Creel twisted with him. He tried to reach Creel's throat with his fingers but the big man was quick. With all his strength Jim brought one knee up into Creel's back. It flung Creel forward. Jim's fingers locked in his hair and yanked his head forward and down. In the same motion Jim rolled, and now Creel was underneath and Jim was astride him, beating him in the face with stinging rights and lefts.

Jim became aware of strong hands grasping him by the shoulders and lifting him bodily off Creel. He saw Creel struggle to his feet, saw the bulky teamsters holding his arms. There were four clinging to Jim as he fought to free himself.

Then Deering stood between them. He was pale, and his eyes were troubled. "If I'm too old, or too feeble, to maintain order in this camp by myself I'll appoint a committee to do so," he said, "but order will be maintained for the remainder of this trip."

He turned and looked at Joe Creel. "If you're intent on coming with us I don't suppose there's much I can do to stop you. However, I do insist that you turn over to me all your crooked dice and marked cards."

Creel was barely listening to Deering's words. He was staring at Jim, anger still flaming in his eyes.

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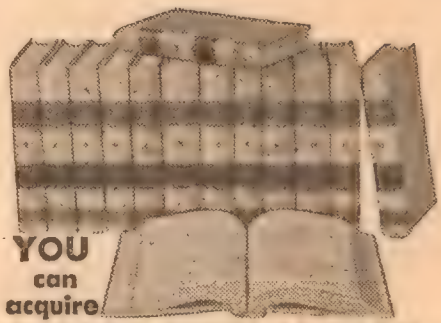

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"The dice and cards are there in my saddle bags. Help yourself," he said. "As for you, my friend"—he spoke coldly, bitterly, his lips barely forming the words—"you and I will settle this some other time, when there's no one to interfere."

"Any time you say," Jim replied easily.

CREEL turned on his heel and pushing through the crowd of men and women that had gathered, strode to his horse standing nearby. Jim turned to Sally Deering.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She had regained her composure, and some of the color had returned to her cheeks. She put a hand on his arm. "I don't know how to thank you," she said simply.

Jim looked down into her upturned face and felt that strange thrill run through him once more. He hadn't been this close to a woman in months. He hadn't seen anyone as pretty or as desirable as Sally in years.

John Deering shook Jim's hand. He was scowling. "You want to watch out for that man," he warned earnestly. "He boasts he's killed a man for every year of his life."

"Who is he?" Jim asked.

"You mean you've never heard of Joe Creel?" Deering's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "He's California's gambling king and number one roustabout."

"Why's he leaving California?" Jim asked.

Deering shrugged. "Could be for any one of several reasons," he said. "From what I hear he was travelling north for Sacramento and just stopped for a few days in Mountain City to try his luck. It could be the law was after him. It could be he's decided to go east and try his luck there."

"If he was going to Sacramento," Jim said slowly, "he changed his mind mighty sudden."

Jim excused himself and joined Hank and Silent, who were standing at one side waiting for him.

"That big feller came durn close to lickin' you, Jim," Hank said anxiously. He held out a gunbelt and a pistol. "I got this out of your pack just now. You better start wearin' it again."

"What about this gent Creel?" Silent asked briefly.

Jim's shoulders rose and fell. "I don't know," he answered. "He fights like that fellow in the warehouse. When I got my hands on him he felt the same size. His suddenly wanting to go east with the train when only yesterday he was heading north, is suspicious."

Hank and Silent were eyeing each other uneasily. "That ain't all," Hank said finally. "Creel's the gent, Jim, who was in the saloon askin' us questions when we was trying to find out where Parrish lived."

Jim looked at his partners long and hard, then he strapped on the pistol at his hip. "That pretty well clinches it," he said slowly. "Creel must have been the man in the warehouse. And definitely heard everything we said."

"And he's after the gold."

Jim nodded.

"He can't hope to get it by hisself," Hank snorted. "I ain't scared of him. Not when there's nine of us to one."

Jim shook his head skeptically. "When friend Creel strikes he won't be by himself. He'll need help and he'll have it."

"Where from?" Hank asked.

"I don't know," Jim said, "but I'll wager that he has a couple of friends in camp right now."

"Three still ain't enough to take that gold away from us," Hank boasted.

"He may have more joining him later up in the hills," Jim pointed out. "He won't strike until he's ready and then he'll jump us the way he jumped on me a minute ago—with both feet."

The sound of a bugle abruptly filled the circle with its raucous, strident notes and instantly teamsters on every side ran for their wagons. Jim saw Sally and John Deering mounting thier horses. A second later whips began to crack and the first wagon rolled out. Creaking and groaning under the weight of the guns under its canvas hood it turned east.

A second wagon fell in behind it. Then a third. Then the whole circle uncoiled into a long twisting line that snaked its way around the outskirts of Mountain

City and turned up a wide canyon that led into the first tier of foothills. Jim's wagons were in the middle of the line and he rode on the flank where he could watch them. A thick cloud of dust filled the canyon, hanging low over the wagons and obscuring either end of the line. It got in Jim's eyes and nose and tasted gritty between his teeth. Out of that murky pall came the continuous popping of whips and the shrill "Hi—yi's" of the drivers.

Then after an hour they passed through the first wave of foothills and came out onto a flat plain. They headed straight across this and entered the second tier. The sun was mounting overhead and beginning to burn down on Jim's shoulders.

IV

FIVE DAYS LATER there was a definite change in the air. They had been climbing gradually, but steadily. The nights now were cold and only for a few hours around noon was the sun at all hot. Once Jim had ridden his horse to the top of a high pinnacle and looked back over their trail and it had been like looking down at a map spread out on a table. And then he had turned and looked up at the Sierras still lying fifty or sixty miles away; their towering peaks jutting into the sky, and he had marvelled at the wild rugged beauty of this western country.

Since daybreak they had been following a deep swiftly-flowing river up a valley that was flat and green as pasture land. On every side were the hills, their slopes thick with spruce and scrub.

At noon camp John and Sally Deering stopped at Jim's wagons. Jim and Silent were seated on the ground with their backs to a wagon-wheel, munching some cold venison.

"You haven't had any more trouble with Joe Creel, have you?" Deering asked.

Jim looked up at Sally and held out some venison and cold journey-cakes. "Join us," he said.

With a smile she slid from her horse and sat on the ground facing him. She

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was wearing trousers and a woolen shirt and she was bareheaded.

"I haven't hardly seen Creel," Jim answered truthfully. "He's kept pretty much to himself since our little trouble."

Deering ate seated astride his horse. "Maybe he'll behave himself."

Jim didn't say anything. He no longer doubted that Creel was the man in the warehouse and he had set Hank and Silent to watch him.

"You were right about his having some friends in the camp," Hank had reported at the end of the first day. "Catlett and Hines is their names. Half-breed Injun and a little lynx-eyed gent. Claim their going east to join the Union army." Hank had spat.

"When you deliver Mr. Parrish's food wagons what are you going to do?" Sally asked now. "Enlist?"

Jim rearded Sally, frowning. He didn't like to lie to her continually. "I expect to," he hedged.

"I feel every able-bodied man should," she said earnestly. "If they did the war would soon be over and thousands of Union lives would be spared." Her eyes were serious.

"And Rebel lives," Jim said.

"I wish all Rebels were dead." Sally spoke so fiercely Jim was startled.

Jim said, "I'm sorry about your brother."

"He was my twin brother." Her voice was dull. "I can't get it out of my mind the way he was treated. Starving men to death is what you might expect from savages."

"The Confederates haven't enough food to go around." Jim stopped suddenly, realizing he was treading on thin ice.

"How do you know so much about them?" Sally asked slowly.

"Just from what I hear," Jim answered evasively. "I heard up in Oregon that they were running out of food, of guns and ammunition, of men—nearly everything."

"Then why don't they give up. Why don't they admit defeat and surrender?"

"They've run out of everything but spirit." That was what Jim would have liked to have told Sally. He could have told her a lot more too, about courage and faith; but of course he didn't.

Silent rose abruptly to his feet and pointed up the valley to a horseman riding toward the train at a dead run.

Deering followed his gaze and said, "Just one of our scouts."

"He's in a big hurry." Jim had risen to his feet. "Looks like something's happened."

They could hear the sound of drumming hoofbeats now as the scout drew near. He raced down the line of wagons and the teamsters shouted questions at him. He drew rein beside Jim's wagon. He was a man in his middle thirties, a mountain man, his smooth-shaven face tanned coppery by the sun.

"Found Injun sign," he reported. "Shoshones by their tracks and their camp. Maybe fifteen or twenty, travelling on foot."

"Hunting party?" Deering asked.

The scout shook his head. "I found where they'd been daubing themselves with paint. War paint."

"Where are they now?" Deering shifted in his saddle uneasily.

The scout waved his hand toward the hills on either side of the train. "Up there in the spruce somewhere, watching?"

"Will they attack us?" Sally's voice was tense.

"Not enough of them to do much attacking," the scout reassured her. "They may do some raiding, maybe try to run off our horses at night."

A small crowd of teamsters had gathered to listen to the scout's words. Jim caught sight of Hank lounging against a near wagon, and he looked around and spotted Creel standing nearby.

An anxious murmur rose from several women but Deering quieted them quickly. "You all heard what the scout said," he told them. "Just don't go wandering off from camp and you'll be safe enough. We'll post a double guard at night."

Sally mounted her horse and she and her father turned and rode with the scout toward the head of the train. Gradually the teamsters and the few women present, dispersed. Hank still lounged against his wagon wheel.

Joe Creel walked slowly up to Jim. He was wearing his black clothes and black hat and looked little the worse for wear after nearly a week on the trail. He seemed swarthier, if anything, and the scar on his cheek, seemed broader and more livid.

"I'm getting a little tired of being followed around, Blaine," he said abruptly. "Your friend over by that wagon, and the one sitting there, don't give me much privacy."

"We just like to keep track of what you're doing."

CREEL STUDIED HIM a moment before answering. "We seem to be watching each other, my friend." He spoke softly, an amused glint suddenly showing in his black, deep-set eyes. "We share a common secret, don't we?"

Jim drew in his breath slowly. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw Hank and Silent stiffen.

"Your hands are tied because of the consequences should your identity become known to Deering and his friends." Creel was smiling, as though it were a joke. "My hands are tied because there are more of you than there are of us." He sobered. "You're wondering what I intend to do about these." His glance shifted to the six gold wagons. "I have a proposition to make you, Blaine." His glance came back to Jim. "A fair proposition."

Hank had drifted closer and stood now just behind Creel, left hand resting on the shaft of his knife.

"One word from me and you're finished. Your wagons are lost and you'll be hanging at the end of a rope." Creel turned his head and looked at Hank. "My friend, in case you don't know it there's a rifle pointed at you and the first unfriendly move you make will be your last."

Startled, Hank turned his head this way and that. His face grew red and he squirted out a stream of tobacco juice, but his hand hesitated and then slipped slowly to his side.

"I might also inform you that all the time you were so carefully following me," Creel added, "that same rifle was fol-

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lowing you. Several times the owner was tempted to pull the trigger. Next time I think he will."

Creel's glance came back to Jim. "The proposition I have to offer you," he said, "is one half of your cargo for my silence. You turn over three of your wagons to me. I go back to California. You go on to Kansas, or Richmond, or wherever you're planning to deliver them."

Jim looked at the big man a moment in silence.

"It's better losing that money than swinging," Creel urged.

Jim threw back his head and laughed. "One of us is crazy," he said, "and it isn't me." He laughed again. "Your bluff doesn't hold water, Creel."

Creel's cheek muscle twitched. It was the only sign of anger that showed. "This is no bluff," he said coldly.

"You'll never tell Deering who we are," Jim said quietly. "You know as well as I do that Deering would take these six wagons and hold them for the authorities at Fort Devlon across the Rockies. That would be the last you ever saw of them."

Creel's face muscle twitched sharply. He studied Jim a moment in silence, then spoke. His words were a grating ugly sound that rasped on Jim's nerves.

"I'd hoped to avoid bloodshed, but now I'm not as sure."

When he had turned on his heel and walked off Jim looked at Hank and Silent.

"He's gotten kind of bold," Hank said with a low whistle.

"Better go easy on the watching," Jim advised. "You might find yourself some day with a bullet in your back."

Jim mounted his horse and a minute later the wagon train started forward again. Jim scanned the spruce-covered ridges on either side and wondered how many pairs of savage eyes were watching the train.

All that afternoon it pushed slowly forward. At sundown the scouts came in and reported no more Indian sign.

Sally stood over her fire, cooking the evening meal. "Maybe it was just a hunting party after all," she said.

The words were hardly out of her mouth when a fusillade of shots rang out, followed instantly by a chorus of wild, hair-raising yells. With a dull thud a long feather-tuffted arrow whammed into the bed of a wagon inches from Sally's head. It hung there quivering.

In one leaping, bounding stride Jim reached Sally's side. His arm swept around her waist and lifting her bodily from her feet, brought her to the ground. He held her down with one hand and yelled at Deering. Sally's father crouched between two wagons, drawing a long-barreled pistol from under his coat.

Another chrous of shrill yells broke out.

"Stay down," Jim commanded Sally.

A second arrow thudded into the wagon over their heads and on hands and knees Jim crawled to the outer rim of the circle and peered across the valley.

The sight that met his startled eyes brought him to his feet with a low curse. It happened all in an instant, before he could draw two breaths. Two women were running wildly toward the train. Despite orders they had wandered away from camp. The Indians had waited until they were half a mile or a mile from the train, then dropped down out of the spruce. Another party had attacked the train to keep help from coming to the women.

Even as he watched, the savages, some fifteen strong, surrounded the women. Tomahawks were upraised, then slashed down. A thin scream, muffled by distance, reached Jim's ears. Then a savage yell of triumph rang out.

From every section of the train men were running toward the women. Guns blazed from the wagons. An angry burst from the teamsters.

But it was too late to do anything. The Shoshones had struck suddenly and swiftly. Yelling fiercely, flinging insults and taunts at the advancing teamsters, they retreated now. Both bands turned and raced for the protection of the hills. Another fierce yell and they disappeared into the spruce.

Jim turned to find Sally and her father standing at his elbow. Sally's face was white.

"Maybe they're not dead," she whispered. "Maybe there's something I can do."

Jim caught her arm when she started forward. He shook his head. "They're dead," he said, "and not a pretty sight to look at. You'd better stay here."

The two scouts strode up. "The teamsters are talking of going after the Injuns," they said. "You better stop them Deering. They'll get lost in those mountains and the Shoshones'll get them to the last man."

Deering hurried off with the scouts and Jim drew Sally back to the fire. It was beginning to grow dark and Jim sat on a wagon tongue and watched Sally go about preparing supper. Her face was still pale and drawn but he thought he had never seen anyone so lovely. He thought too that she was a Yankee and he remembered with a feeling of helplessness how much she hated the Confederates. They were as far apart as two people could be.

Deering returned in half an hour. Later, when darkness had settled over the camp two graves were dug within the circle of wagons. The two women were buried and the earth trampled down and ashes from the fires scattered over the fresh earth. That done, neither Indians, nor coyotes would be able to find the spot.

The camp gradually quieted. After checking with each one of the six teamsters Jim rolled up in his blankets under one of the gold wagons. A close, but casual, watch was kept continually on the wagons. No one as yet, though, had shown any interest in the barrels of flour and dried fruits. No one, that is, but Creel.

V

A HAND on his shoulder awoke Jim some time later. He started to sit up when the hand closed firmly over his mouth and Hank's whisper breathed in his ear.

"Joe Creel and his two friends just left camp, Jim. They got their bedrolls fixed up to look like they're asleep but they didn't fool me none."

Jim sat up swiftly and Hank's hand fell away from his mouth. Silent crouched beside his partner. Jim glanced around.

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The fires had burned low. He guessed it was near one o'clock in the morning.

"Where'd they go?"

"Straight across the valley toward the hills."

"Anybody see them? What about the guards?"

"They left camp on their bellies, crawlin' past the guards like a bunch of Injuns. That's why we called yuh, Jim. There's somethin' brewin'."

Jim rose to his feet and quickly strapped his pistol around his waist. He drew his rifle from its saddle scabbard.

"We'd better follow them," he said.

"What's Creel up to?"

"Don't know," Jim answered. He didn't want to voice his suspicions until he was certain. "Let's go."

They walked boldly between two wagons. A sentry challenged them. Jim spoke to him briefiy and they went on. It was a dark and moonless night. They crossed the valley silently until they came to the hills. Under a tall spruce Jim stopped.

"How're we gonna follow them in the dark?" Hank asked, low-voiced.

"Listen," Jim said warningly.

Far up on the slope of the mountain an owl had hooted. There was a pause. Then the answer came not more than two hundred yards from where Jim and his companions crouched.

Five, then ten, minutes they waited. Then once again the owl hooted up the mountain. This time, though, the answer was farther away.

Jim rose to his feet.

"What is it?" Hank whispered.

"Creel's making contact with the Indians. It must be that halfbreed doing the calling. No white man could sound that much like an owl."

Slowly, in single file, they started up the mountain side. Jim had to feel his way through the blackness. Every foot or so Hank's fingers touched his shoulder. There was no talking now. They passed noiselessly from tree to tree. Once more the owls hooted.

A little to the right this time and Jim changed his direction.

At the end of half an hour they'd gone a mile straight up the mountain. Then the owls stopped, and Jim knew that Creel and the Indians had met.

"Their camp must be close," he breathed in Hank's ear. "Don't make a sound. Indians have ears that can pick up a man's breathing at a hundred yards."

They waited ten minutes, then advanced cautiously. The ground beneath their feet had begun to level off and Jim guessed they had reached the top of this particular ridge. The spruce was not so thick here and he caught occasional glimpses of the sky over their heads.

Then so suddenly that they nearly stumbled into it they came to a ravine. Jim crouched on the rim, Hank and Silent tense beside him. A hundred yards down the ravine was a fire. It was close under an overhanging rock that reflected its light down. That was why they hadn't seen its glow before. Twenty-five or thirty Indians were seated about it. And in their midst sat Joe Creel and his two companions.

Jim cupped both hands to Hank's ear. "Wait here,"

Carefully Jim drew back from the ravine. He crawled parallel to it for a hundred yards, then approached it again, dropping to his hands and knees, then wriggling the last twenty feet on his stomach.

He didn't crawl completely to the edge, for fear of being seen. He lay behind a thicket. From here a low mutter of voices reached him. By straining his ears he could just hear what was being said.

Twenty minutes later Jim drew slowly back from the ravine. He found Hank and Silent where he had left them. Noiselessly they crept away. It wasn't until they were halfway down the mountain again that they broke their silence.

"The breed's got Shoshone blood in him," Jim explained what he had heard. "He vouched for Joe Creel and Creel told them about the gold and the guns. The Indians have no use for the gold, but they want those guns and the ammunition to go with them."

"With those guns they'll make it hell for white men in these mountains," Hank growled.

"We've got to destroy those wagons," Jim said.

"It's a big order."

"Those were our instructions anyway," Jim reminded him. "Now we have two reasons."

"How we goin' to do it?"

Jim didn't answer.

They continued down the mountain and came out onto the valley floor. Half a mile distant the lights from the wagon train blinked through the night.

"The Indians have already sent out runners to bring back help," Jim said. "That means we haven't much time."

They crossed the valley, were challenged by the sentry, and entered the circle of wagons. Jim glanced at the dark forms lying about on the ground wrapped in blankets. He gripped Hank's arm suddenly.

"We're going to destroy this train tonight," he said fiercely. "Now."

"How?" Hank asked calmly.

Jim glanced up at the sky. It was too clouded to tell where the moon was, but he guessed the time at two o'clock. That gave them three to three and a half hours before daylight. He drew Hank and Silent between two of the gold wagons where they couldn't be seen.

"Now listen and listen carefully," he said. "Each of you take a bucket and fill it with coals from the fire. Drop two or three coals in as many wagons as you can, and as near the ammunition boxes as possible."

"And don't make any noise. If you're discovered, make a break for it. And keep going. It'll be every man for himself."

THE TWO OLD MEN nodded in the darkness. Jim gave them a shove that started them toward the fire. He awoke his teamsters then, one by one, and gave them orders what to do. When he returned to the fire Hank and Silent were gone. He sat down to wait.

It wasn't long. Hank and Silent loomed up like shadows beside him.

"We lit about every third wagon," Hank whispered. "One fellow woke up

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but he didn't see us. Another was sleeping in his wagon and Silent almost dropped a hot coal in his mouth before he saw him."

They stopped talking and crouched, waiting. The camp was quiet, almost dark. A horse whinnied somewhere in the darkness. An owl, a real one this time, hooted in the distance.

Jim became aware of a sudden glow off to his right. He stood up and saw tongues of flame licking out from under the hood of a wagon. He could hear their crackling.

Then a shrill yell of alarm rang through the night. At the same instant a second wagon, without any warning, burst into flames. Then a third, and a fourth. Teamsters were springing from their blankets now. Yells of surprise burst from a score of throats. For several seconds they stood dumfounded, not knowing what to do.

At the first cry of alarm Jim's teamsters had rolled to their feet and dashed for the lead wagon. One man had picked up the heavy tongue. The others had put their shoulders to the wheels. In half a minute they'd rolled the wagon a hundred yards from the circle. Now they were on the second.

With a blinding, thunderous roar the powder in one of the gun wagons blew. Jim felt the blast of hot air against his face, felt the ground shake under his feet. Bits of burning canvas and wood flew out in every direction. In an instant several wagons nearby were aflame.

Jim saw Deering near the center of the circle, issuing orders frantically. Sally was standing beside him, a look of horror and dismay on her face and for a fleeting moment he experienced a feeling of guilt that was very nearly regret. He threw it off and helped push the fifth wagon out of danger. The sixth followed a minute later, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

The other teamsters were doing the same with the untouched gun wagons. A second wagon exploded. Then, with the rapidity of cannon fire, one after another went off. Jim saw Deering and Sally running from the circle of leaping roaring flames that had once been a wagon train. He saw the tears of helpless rage running down over Sally's cheeks. He guessed the loss meant more to her than to her father. Jim didn't remember ever having seen a more fiercely loyal person than Sally.

His teamsters came up leading their teams of horses. "Most of the others stampeded," Hank reported.

For twenty minutes they stood and watched the wagons burn. Then gradually the flames began to subside.

"I'll bet the Shoshones are watchin' this from up on the mountain," Hank said. "I'd like to see their faces right now. Joe Creel's too."

"Turn around," Jim said, "and you'll have your wish."

Creel and his two friends were running across the valley toward them. Creel's face was flushed and sweating as he drew up beside Jim. He stared at the fires, then his glance flew to the six gold wagons and Jim saw the relief flood into his eyes.

Those eyes fixed on Jim, and they were sharp and accusing. They were filled with anger too. But he didn't say anything. And he wouldn't, Jim knew. Joe Creel was as anxious to keep the gold a secret as he was.

The big man turned on his heel and strode away. Jim walked over to the Deering's standing helplessly at one side.

"It was those Indians," Deering was saying. "They sneaked in past the guards and set the wagons on fire." He glanced at Jim. "I see you saved your wagons."

Jim nodded.

"I'm glad," Sally said. "I'm glad some were saved.

THE FIRST STREAKS of dawn were beginning to cast a pale light into the valley now. Every wagon not burning, or already burned, had been dragged from the circle. With the growing light of day it was possible to better evaluate the damage that had been done.

Out of thirty-six wagons nine had been saved. Sally flushed as she listened to her father's report and what little color had come back into her cheeks drained completely away. She clenched her fists.

"I can't belive it," she cried. "All those guns and all that ammunition destroyed."

The two scouts and a score of teamsters had come up. Joe Creel was with them, standing on the fringe of the crowd. Creel seemed to be as stunned as anyone else by the disaster.

"Nine wagons left," John Deering said. He straightened his shoulders with an effort. "There's nothing to do but turn back to California."

An angry mutter rose from the crowd.

"I'd like to get my hands on those Injuns," a burly teamster snarled. "I'd pay 'em back for what they done."

Deering turned suddenly to Jim. "Our food wagons were completely destroyed," he said. "We don't like to do it, but we'll have to call on you for help. I don't think there's enough food even for breakfast."

Deering's words burst like a bombshell in Jim's ears. He saw Hank and Silent stiffen. He saw Joe Creel's head snap up.

Jim thought rapidly for a moment, then he answered quietly. "This food doesn't belong to me. Until it's delivered to the army it belongs to Rose Parrish. I can't let you have any of it without his approval."

Deering looked at him, startled. "You're joking," he said.

"But you can't mean it," Sally cried.

"This is an emergency, man." Deering's voice rose angrily.

"I'm sorry," Jim said evenly. "That food has got to go through untouched."

"You mean you're going on, even if we turn back?" Deering asked.

"Certainly," Jim said.

All eyes were on Jim.

"There's plenty of game in the hills," he urged.

"And plenty of Shoshones," Deering answered.

"I'm sorry," Jim repeated, "but that's the way it's got to be."

He turned and, with Hank and Silent, pushed through the crowd of teamsters that gave way grudgingly before them.

"There's going to be trouble, Jim," Hank said anxiously when they were out of earshot. "Those teamsters are gonna get hungry and want food."

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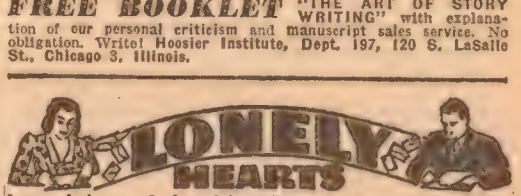

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But if the flour barrels were opened the gold would be discovered. Jim paced up and down in front of the six wagons. He thought of pulling out and leaving, but that would be playing directly into Creel's hands.

Jim laughed mirthlessly. Fate had dealt the first four cards of a royal straight flush, then clubbed him with another suit.

"Keep your guns handy," he told his teamsters when he had explained what had happened.

But the morning passed without any trouble. A sack of meal had been found in the burned wagons and Jim saw some hunters come in with a string of rabbits. Others of the teamsters were out rounding up the horses that had broken away.

"Some of them are sayin' it's mighty funny none of our wagons an' horses were lost," Hank told Jim. "They're growin' suspicious."

Just before noon the real trouble started. Jim had been watching some of the teamsters searching in the still smoking ruins of the burned wagons. They were looking for food, and not finding any.

A crowd gathered around the nine gun wagons that had been saved. They were talking with Deering, arguing with him. The sound of voices, raised angrily, reached Jim's ears.

Then in a mass seventy teamsters turned and walked slowly toward him. He stepped out in front of his wagons and they stopped ten feet away.

"We're here for some food," Deering said shortly. "We'll compensate Parrish for what we use when we get back to Mountain City. I think one wagon load will do us. We're leaving in the morning and should make it back in four days."

Jim shook his head. "You can't have it," he said firmly. "This food is for the army. They need it more that you do."

Deering hesitated.

"Did yuh ever try to share a rabbit with ten others," a teamster yelled. "I like my johnny-cakes and I aim to have them."

"That's right," a chorus of yells agreed.

The crowd pressed forward. They were carrying guns. Jim flung a quick glance over his shoulder and saw his six teamsters standing in a line with their rifles ready.

"Stand back," he shouted at Deering's men, "or we'll shoot."

INSTANTLY the crowd sprang forward, scattering as it came. A gun bellowed and a bullet crashed into the wagon back of Jim. He heard his teamsters fire a volley. He didn't get a chance to pull trigger himself. Deering's teamsters were all over him before he could move a muscle. A hairy fist smashed against his jaw. A pair of long arms seized him from behind. A gun-butt crashed against his head and he was dragged to the ground by sheer weight of numbers.

He lay there on his back, held down securely by half a dozen teamsters. He saw Hank go down, clubbed by a rifle. Silent was struggling on the ground with two men on his back. Deering's teamsters drove Jim's six drivers back against the wagons and pinned them there with guns against their chests.

As quickly as it had begun the fight ended. A pistol was pressed against Jim's head and he was made to get on his feet. Deering stood in front of him.

"I don't like to do it this way," he said, "but these men are hungry, and that's all there is to it." He turned to some of his teamsters. "Break out a barrel of corn meal," he ordered, "and every man take what he needs for today."

Several teamsters sprang to obey. They clambered over the tailgate of the nearest wagon and ripped away the tarpaulin covering the barrels and boxes of food. They rolled a barrel over the gate and eased it down into the arm of some companions.

Jim watched the proceedings tensely. He glanced at Hank and Silent sitting on the ground nearby. They were staring at the flour barrel in fascination.

He watched as a teamster stepped up with an ax and with one blow knocked in the barrel-head. A second teamster stood by the barrel with a tin cup. Most of the teamsters carried their corn meal away in their hats. A few came with buckets and pails.

Then abruptly the man with the tin cup stopped ladling. He stared down into the

barrel, his eyes bulging in their sockets. Jim felt a cold prickling sensation at the base of his scalp.

The man reached down into the barrel, then straightened slowly and held up a heavy rectangular-shaped piece of metal. The sun shone on it yellowly. The crowd fell silent. Every glance was on that gleaming yellow metal. It was as though every man had stopped breathing.

There was a pause, then a hoarse voice whispered, "Gold! A gold bar!"

The crowd pressed around the barrel. A dozen hands reached inside. Another bar of gold was held aloft. Someone seized the ax and in a second the barrel was split in two. Yellow corn meal spilled to the ground and was trampled on. Two teamsters laid eager fingers on the same bar and knives flashed instantly into their hands.

Deering pushed through the crowd with the two scouts at his side. They laid about them with their gun-butts and opened a cleared space about the barrel.

"That ain't all the gold there is," a teamster shouted. "There's other meal barrels. There's six wagon loads of them."

Deering held up his hands for silence. "Bring Blaine here," he ordered sternly.

Jim was led forward, a man at either elbow, a pistol at the back of his neck.

"You'd better start talking," Deering said.

"All right," Jim answered. "That's gold, and there's plenty of it in those wagones. That's why I wasn't willing to let you have any food. I had my orders, and I was only obeying them."

"Orders from whom " Deering asked.

Seventy faces stared at Jim expectantly.

"From the Union authorities," Jim lied. "This is Union gold going to Washington for minting."

The faces continued to stare at him.

"Why all the secrecy?" Deering asked. "And who are you?"

"The reason for secrecy is obvious," Jim answered. "As for me, you know my name. I'm an officer in the United States Army."

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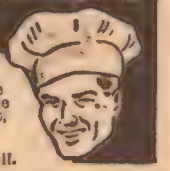

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It took a second or two for his words to sink in.

"That gold is U.S. government property," he added. "I wouldn't advise anyone trying to keep any of it."

Deering motioned with his hand. "Let him go," he said, "and turn those other two loose."

Out of the corners of his eyes Jim saw the relief that flashed into Hank's and Silent's faces. He felt a surge of triumph.

"Just a minute," a voice said behind him. "That man is lying."

Jim stared at Joe Creel as the big man elbowed a path through the crowd and stood in front of Deering. Jim felt a tightening around his throat. He knew what was coming and he was powerless to stop it.

Joe Creel turned a malevolent eye on Jim. Now that the bullion had been discovered his waiting game was over. "That's Confederate gold." He spoke loudly, so everyone could hear. "And Blaine is an officer all right, but in the Confederate army."

Stunned silence greeted his words. Over the heads of the men Jim saw Sally standing at the edge of the crowd. One hand covered her mouth, as though to conceal her surprise and dismay.

There was a bewildered look on Deering's face.

Then slowly a low growl of rage rose from the ranks of teamsters. It swelled and grew until finally it burst into full song.

"String them up."

"They're spies, ain't they?"

The yells came from a score of throats. The crowd pressed forward.

Deering stepped in front of it. "That will do." He spoke sharply. "There'll be no killing," he shouted. "These men are prisoners and will be turned over to the proper authorities in Mountain City for trial there."

"And you'd better impound that gold," Creel advised. "That's Union gold now and you'd better put a strong guard over it."

If he hadn't felt himself in the shadow of the gallows Jim would have laughed. Joe Creel was worried. Worried something would happen to the gold before he could get his hands on it.

But mention of the gold turned the teamsters attention back to the barrel.

"It's our gold," a teamster bellowed. "For the takin'."

VI

AND WITH THAT the rush began. As one man the crowd surged forward and surrounded the wagon.

"Get back," Deering shouted. "Get back, you men."

He drew his pistol from under his coat. It was knocked from his hand. The two scouts raised their rifles. Teamsters wrenched them away. Others were climbing on the wagon, tearing away the canvass hood. A second barrel was rolled to the tailgate. It crashed to the ground, split and spilled its contents on the grass.

A score of teamsters flung themselves on the pile of white flour and scattering it, fought to lay hands on the yellow bars of gold. The teamsters saw wealth at their finger-tips and in that instant went berserk. Deering stood helplessly in their midst.

Forgotten for the moment Jim stepped to where Hank and Silent were standing, watching the mad scramble of the teamsters.

"We'd better get out of here," Hank whispered hoarsely. "We can't do nothin' now."

Jim's hands clenched and he hesitated. His plans had gone wrong, but he knew Hank was right. To stay now was suicide.

He motioned with his hand to his six teamsters and quietly he started backing away. Hank and Silent followed.

Jim turned and at a run led his men toward some horses staked out in the grass a hundred yards away. They'd covered half the distance when Hank caught his arm. Jim stopped. At the same moment the other teamsters saw it and froze in their tracks.

A little shiver ran up Jim's spine. He had seen Indians before. He had fought against them, three different times on the journey west. But he had never before seen so many at one time.

They were a black line advancing down the valley toward the camp, and no more than a thousand feet away. Jim could see the feathered headdresses, and the long bows clutched in coppery red hands. They came on silently, bent double, running swiftly.

Jim whipped his pistol from its holster and fired a single shot into the air.

Hank and Silent and the other teamsters turned and raced for the protection of the wagons. It was as though his shot had been a signal. A wild chorus of yells rose behind Jim and turning his head he saw the savages sprinting the last eight or nine hundred feet.

Deering's men had stopped ransacking the flour barrels and were staring at the approaching Indians in astonishment. There was relief on Joe Creel's face. Jim felt the urge to expose him, but he wondered how many would believe him. Nor was there time.

The Indians were two hundred yards away now. The line split, one half quickly surrounded the gun wagons that had been left unguarded. The other half raced toward the gold wagons, spreading out and circling it as they rushed in for a quick kill.

The teamsters flung themselves into the grass and crouched behind the wagons. Deering and Sally lay behind one of the flour barrels. A volley of shot rang out. But it didn't stop the Shoshones.

Jim felt his breath come rapidly. The shrill yells of the Indians were enough to freeze the blood in a man's veins. A hundred hideously-painted redmen charging him were like a nightmare.

As fast as he could fire and reload Jim triggered his pistol. The crash and thunder of guns was all around him. Black powdersmoke fogged his eyes, burned his nostrils. Arrows were thudding into the wagons over his head. A teamster screamed. Another rolled over clawing at a feathered shaft that had gone clear through his neck and come out behind.

And then the savages were on them. Jim sprang to his feet and slashed at a coppery face with his gun barrel. It landed with a sudden thud and the Indian fell.

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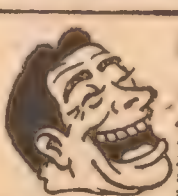

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Another sprang to take his place. A tomahawk flashed down. Jim ducked under it and brought his pistol up against a bone-hard jaw. The Indian fell away, blood gushing from his mouth. On every side men fought and cursed and died. Jim sprang on a savage's back and clubbed a shaven head into the ground.

Leaping up Jim flung a glance around him. The teamsters were standing their ground, fighting furiously. A dozen were down, dead or wounded. A score of Indians lay beside them. One was trying to crawl away. A bullet stopped him. Back to back Hank and Silent were slashing right and left with their knives.

Jim's glance sought and found the feathered chieftain who had led the Indians' attack. He was a tall, powerful savage with a headdress of feathers that hung down his back to his ankles. His face was streaked with paint.

Jim drew his knife and sprang at him. The Indian turned to meet his attack and his cruel eyes glittered eagerly. He raised his tomahawk.

It fell in a blur of speed. Jim met it in the only possible way with the point of his knife. He heard the Indian's grunt of pain, saw the startled surprise flash into that savage face. The tomahawk slipped from the Shoshone's fingers. He wrenched his arm away and with his free hand plucked at the knife imbedded in his wrist.

Jim scooped up the fallen tomahawk and drove it with all his strength into the savage's face. The Shoshone dropped at his feet, and sprawled out on his back. He was dead before he hit the ground.

YELLS OF RAGE rose from the Indians when they saw their chieftain go down. Their attack faltered. Then they began to give ground. With answering yells the teamsters drove them back. Drove them out of the camp. Drove them out across the valley.

And with that the Shoshones broke and ran. They turned and fled away across the grass. The teamsters let them go, flung a last few shots at them. Then gradually the firing slackened, and stopped.

Jim turned back to the wagons. Hank and Silent were alive, but one of his six teamsters was dead. Deering had lost five men, and a dozen more were wounded. Sally Deering was sitting on the ground, her hands covering her face, as though to shut out the sights and sounds around her. But even as Jim watched she rose shakily to her feet and went to help with the wounded.

"You may be a Confederate, Blaine, but you're a fighter," Deering said, "and we're grateful for what you did."

"They've got the gun wagons," a teamster shouted. "They've pulled them out of range and are helpin' themselves."

It was true. The Indians had pulled the wagons down to the river-bank and were unloading the crates of rifles and the kegs of ammunition. Already a score of them were brandishing rifles over their heads. A few shots rang out.

Deering drew a deep breath. "We've got to stop them," he said quietly, "before they all outfit themselves. Against that many of the savages armed with rifles instead of bows and arrows we won't have a chance."

Deering gave his orders calmly and thirty seconds later sixty of the teamsters started across the grass toward the river. It was four hundred yards and they took it at a run, spreading out into a fan-shaped line that swept down on the Indians with blazing guns.

Fierce, taunting yells greeted the attack. The savages had unloaded five of the wagons and now bullets as well as arrows fell amongst the teamsters. But the heart seemed to have gone out of the Shoshones with the death of their chieftain. They gave ground grudgingly before the teamsters. They deserted the wagons and fell back along the river-bank.

"After them." Deering called to his men. "Don't let them get away or they'll come back to harry us all the way to Mountain City."

The fighting was hand to hand after that. In groups of four or five the teamsters gave chase. Jim found a rifle at the wagons and with Hank and Silent at his heels raced after a small band of Indians retreating down the valley. Horses

that had broken their hobbles were galloping back and forth across the valley, but the firing had made them spooky and Jim couldn't get near enough to catch one.

Twenty minutes later he drew to a panting halt. They'd come nearly a mile and now they paused to look about them. The firing had slackened as other groups of teamsters had stopped for breath. Jim looked back up the valley and he slowly stiffened.

The gold wagons were gone!

He exchanged startled glances with Hank and Silent.

"Joe Creel," Hank said dully. "He made off with them."

Jim's arms hung limply at his sides. There was a bloody gash across his scalp above his right ear where a Shoshone tomahawk had grazed his skull. It was beginning to hurt and he was bone-tired and winded.

But he shook off his lethargy and pointed to some horses trotting along the riverbank toward them. Several had hackamores over their noses. One was trailing a rope tied around its neck.

They stopped as Jim walked near. Hank and Silent came in on their flanks. They snorted and wheeling started back. Hank ran to intercept them. They stopped and milled about nervously.

Talking quietly to them, Jim walked up to the nearest horse and caught his hackamore. A minute later they were cantering across the valley. Some teamsters shouted at them but they didn't stop. As they drew near the camp Sally ran forward to meet them.

"It was Creel," she gasped. "He and his friends and four or five of the teamsters hitched up the wagons and went off that way."

She was pointing up the valley where the trail vanished into the hills down a deep gorge. Jim saw his five teamsters running toward them across the plain.

"Joe Creel planned this Indian attack," he said. "He and his renegade friends."

The teamsters had come up and Jim motioned them toward the horses. They mounted quickly.

"Where are you going?" Sally asked.

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Jim nodded toward the hills.

"To bring back the gold?"

"No," Jim answered quietly. "To take it east." He reached out and touched her arm. "I'm sorry we're not on the same side in this war," he said. "I wish you were going with us."

FOR AN INSTANT he thought he saw the sternness melt in her eyes. She was looking at him, her lips parted.

Then she drew back swiftly and he saw the pistol in her hand.

"You forget you're a prisoner," she said.

Jim looked down at the gun. Turning away then he walked to his horse. He vaulted onto its back and smiled down at her. He touched his forehead in a salute, then swung his animal around.

A bullet droned over his head and a thin cloud of smoke puffed out over the canvas hood of the last wagon. The roar of the shot boomed and reverberated down the gorge, and was followed by another.

Then the wagons drew to a slithering halt as the brakes were applied and Jim saw Creel and the halfbreed and three other teamsters running back to the last wagon, firing as they came. A bullet tugged at his leggins, ripping them across his thigh. A second caught his horse squarely between the eyes.

Jim was aware of pounding hoofs behind him and he leaped aside as Hank and Silent thundered into the narrow space between the wagons and the canyon wall.

Jim spun and looked for Creel. He saw him darting from sight between two wagons and he plunged in pursuit. He came out on the other side of the wagons. Creel was running up the gorge.

Jim lunged after him and Creel turned and a gun blazed in his hand. Jim felt the scorching breath of lead against his cheek and lunged at Creel and grasped him around the knees, bringing him to the ground.

Then his groping fingers found a rock and he brought it down on Jim's head with sickening force. Again and again he pounded Jim's head. Jim felt his senses reel. Desperately, his fingers clawed at Creel's throat. He began to squeeze . . .

The next thing he knew he was lying in the dust beside Creel's inert body. He looked at the big man. Creel's face was a mottled purple.

Jim sat up dizzily. Creel didn't move.

The fighting was over and Hank and Silent were just disarming Creel's drivers.

"Unhitch the horses," he ordered. "Take the hoods off the wagons and make packs out of them. Three of you dump out the barrels and break them open. You can stack the gold over their against the wall."

The teamsters looked startled, but sprang to obey without questioning him. Hank and Silent ran to unhitch the teams.

In thirty minutes the job was done.

"We can make faster time this way," Jim explained. "We have a chance now, a good chance, of outrunning them."

Relief plainly showing in their faces the men turned and walked off down the gorge. Jim stood looking after them. He became aware of Hank at his elbow.

"Thinkin' of that girl, ain't you, boy "

Jim nodded.

"I seen the way you looked at her and the way she looked at you," Hank said. "Maybe after the war is fit and over you can come back and look for her. She'll feel different then about your being a Johnny Reb."

Jim nodded. "Maybe," he said softly. "I hope so."

He turned to his horse and mounted. Riding to the head of the pack train he took the lead and it swung slowly into motion behind him.

"Get goin' you goldurned old coot." Silent's voice came to him over the thud of hoofs a moment later. "Get that plug of your'n out of my way."

"What plug in whose way." Hank's voice snarled in reply. "You mangy dog you can hold yours back, can't you?"

"You call me a mangy dog once't more and I'll put a bullet through your durn hide twice," Silent warned.

"You and how many thousand others?" Hank snorted. "Yuh mangy dog."

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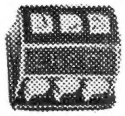

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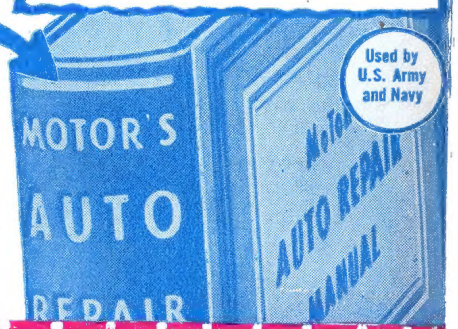

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